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# National report Ireland

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*with the kind support of members of the National Advisory Group*

## Deliverable 5.2

January 2020

Dissemination Level: Public

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## Glossary

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- ETB** Education and Training Board; *ETBs were established 1 July 2013 to provide education and training provision in communities throughout Ireland*
- ETBI** Education and Training Board Ireland; *ETBI is the national representative body for Ireland's sixteen Education and Training Boards.*
- QQI** Quality and Qualifications Ireland; *an independent State agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland.*
- NCGE** National Centre for Guidance in Education; *the mission of the National Centre for Guidance in Education is to develop and support quality guidance provision in the education sector as part of lifelong learning in accordance with national and international best practice*
- Aontas** National Adult Learning Organisation; *advocating for the rights of all adults in Ireland for quality lifelong learning*
- SOLAS** *The Further Education and Training Authority, with responsibility for funding, planning and co-ordinating Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland*
- DEASP** The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
- NALA** The National Adult Literacy Agency
- SLMRU** Skills and Labour Market Research Unit
- POBAL** *support communities and local agencies toward achieving social inclusion and development on behalf of a range of government departments*
- FET** *Further Education and Training, also known as VET or vocational education and training in Europe*
- AEGI** *Adult Education Guidance Initiative/ Services: Irish Department of Education and Skills funded guidance in FET includes the Adult Educational Guidance Initiative (AEGI), Post Leaving Cert / Colleges of Further Education (PLC/CFE), Youthreach/ Community Training Centres (CTCs) etc. Adult Educational Guidance Initiative/Services refer to the existing 37 ETB AEGS currently providing impartial careers and education information to adults who wish to return to education and training or are already registered on an FET programme within the ETBs to make informed educational, career and life choices.*

## Abbreviations

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- Intreo** *Ireland's Public Employment Service, Intreo centres integrate provision of benefit and employment services through local 'one-stop-shops', Intreo Centres are single points of contact for employment and income supports. Designed to provide a more streamlined approach, Intreo offers employment services and supports for jobseekers and employers alike. In the Public Employment Sector i.e. through the Irish Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) guidance related services are provided in Intreo offices and by EmployAbility and local employment and job placements services.*
- TOBAR** *Gaelic word meaning 'the well'- title of a parallel RPL project conducted by ten ETBs in collaboration with the Defence Forces. VISKA and TOBAR were originally planned to work simultaneously.*
- SKILLNET IRELAND** *Skillnet Ireland is a business support agency of the Government of Ireland. Our mandate is to advance the competitiveness, productivity and innovation of Irish businesses through enterprise-led workforce development.*

## Executive Summary

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This report aims to provide information relating principally to two interventions of the VISKA project in Ireland, networking under the auspices of the National Advisory Group (Intervention 1) and the testing of the EU Skills Profiling Tool as a contribution to the development of a digital tool for the identification of skills in validation (an element of Intervention 2, Deliverable D3.1), notwithstanding work carried out nationally over the duration of the project relating to all interventions, or the original aims of project engagement. It seeks in addition to answering the questions posed by the researchers within the report to additionally set out what VISKA Ireland did, what happened because of this, how- if at all- this influenced policy and how VISKA helped. In as far as is possible sensibly, it treats VISKA in isolation from other national developments in the validation field.

The opening chapter sets out the methodology and context, focused on the testing of the EU Skills Profiling tool (Deliverable D3.1); learning from reflection on the methodology of the conduct of the testing of this tool in Ireland underscored a consensus on the value of an ongoing evidence base supporting arguments for the provision of enhanced and extended validation services, including as reviewed by a diversity of peers.

A discussion on the VISKA Validation process is, of necessity, brief as technically this pertained only to the identification phase of the test of the EU Skills Profiling Tool (Deliverable D3.1); however, discussion was situated within the National Advisory Group representing a lively confluence of validation related activities and networks. Consensus emerged highlighting an optimum condition of coordination and visibility of validation policy, strategy and services that are well signposted. This was derived from the experience, in part in implementing the trial, that there are abundant skills to be made visible and this process of giving visibility is valuable beyond the recognition itself. Additionally, it was felt that measures addressing people who are low skilled or low qualified should be 'validation proofed' so as to provide for appropriate opportunities for identification, documentation, assessment and certification.

The intervention to develop and extend regional and national networks is explored largely through the lens of the National Advisory Group, with associated network/focus groups developed for consultative purposes supporting the project outcomes and research which operated somewhat in parallel with national field trials in Flanders, Iceland and Norway. Key emergent learning supports the development of specific networks for specific target groups, with linked strategic programmes of work and named points of contact within relevant organisations and agencies.

A Chapter on that extension and adaptation of tools (relating to VISKA project Work Package 3) for the validation of prior learning for people with low levels of skills and or qualifications, including

migrants and refugees presents feedback on the testing the EU Skills Profiling Tool (Deliverable D3.1), and not on work conducted nationally on other tools within VSKA. It concludes that guidance services available in FET and including in public employment services, are best positioned to lead the identification of the policy implications of the development of digital tools that facilitate personal as opposed to general progression planning, while education and training providers are best positioned to make recommendations about tools that support validation against programmes and awards. It will be necessary at policy level to facilitate and fund connecting these two, respecting the competences of each, but looking forward to data interoperability and efficiencies for citizens.

Transversal skills (VSKA Deliverable D3.2) when considered within Networks, particularly under the auspices of the National Advisory Group, underscored the value to the individual and appreciation of the model aligning more with HR perspectives than that traditionally of education and training; it was felt that this was more likely to be closer to most people's lived experience. There was also a consensus regarding the desirability of availability of training for staff in facilitating such discussion and evidence gathering, and provision of time for this work. Similarly, a call for a requirement for situated evaluation regarding benefit of assessment of transversal skills, whether formative or summative was made so that an evidence base is there to defend but also nuance emerging practices.

The chapter on Capacity Building for Guidance and other Front-line Staff summarise the outcomes of Network consideration of the training module developed and tested by some partners within VSKA (VSKA Deliverable D3.3). Ultimately it was agreed that the availability of continuous professional development (CPD) for practitioners involved in validation was a high priority; it was felt that CPD needed to be practice oriented and organic, utilising an appropriate balance of technology and face to face delivery. When integrated with reflections from the delivery of the field trial testing the EU Skills Profiling Tool, there was greater interest in a broader need for training in intercultural sensitivity.

The penultimate chapter, treating access and awareness of validation services was treated somewhat tentatively within VSKA Ireland project plans except from the perspective of informing education and training providers and stakeholders, because from the outset it was felt to be premature to advertise or create an expectation of a service that does not yet exist or only partially exists. The objectives principally lay in deepening and informing opportunities within and between policy and services. VSKA was an enabling factor in creating stimuli and opportunities for connecting people, services, policies, tools, practices and ideas- but limited in power.

The final chapter looks to lessons learned from our engagement with VISKA, and on the reflections of experts on which this report is based.

QQI would specifically like to thank the members of the National Advisory Group, and the leadership, practitioners and service users of Warrenmount Community Education Centre, Donegal Education and Training Board, Louth and Meath Education and Training Board, Galway Roscommon Education and Training Board, and Mayo Sligo Leitrim Education and Training Board who conducted field trials of the EU Skills Profiling Tool for VISKA . Particular thanks to *Nuala Kilgannon, Deirdre McColgan, Eilis Coyne, Pauine McGalley and Barbara Ronayne* who led the trials and gathering of feedback within their provision.

The National Advisory Group comprised *Ciarán Lynch (Cork ETB, Chair), Martina Needham, (RPL Practitioner Network and TOBAR lead), , Joseph Gleeson (DES), Stacey Cannon (DES, formerly Margaret McCarthy), Gabrielle Walsh (DEASP), Mary Lyons (SOLAS, formerly Brian Redmond), Dearbhail Lawless (Aontas, formerly Suzanne Kyle), Gillian Harris (NALA), Mary Stokes (NCGE), Siobhan McEntee (ETBI, Social Inclusion, formerly Pat O Mahony), Mary Mooty (ETBI), Angela Higgins (KWETB, QA Officers Forum), Ciarán Ó Maithiúna (FET HEI Forum), Michael Kenny (FET HEI Forum), Oonagh Maher (Adult Education Guidance), Deirdre Goggin (CIT), Anne Higgins (RPL Practitioner Network), Aidan Kenny (TUI), Oran Doherty (Regional Skills Fora), Martina Keogh (Ballymun Jobs), Roisin Sweeney (QQI), Andrina Wafer (QQI).*

## Introduction

The 'Visible Skills of Adults' Project (VSKA) is a collaboration between four partner countries: Belgium (Flanders), Norway, Iceland and Ireland. Project VSKA addresses the European policy priority of diminishing skills mismatch, fostering employability, economic growth and job creations, and social inclusion – by making knowledge, skills and competences of adults more visible through validation of informal and non-formal learning. It centres on qualitative improvement in current validation policies and practices in the four partner countries. VSKA is a three-year project, running from March 2017 to February 2020 and is co-ordinated by Skills Norway. The research and evaluation partner of the VSKA project is Cork Institute of Technology, Ireland. This report presents national findings for Ireland for the VSKA project as a whole.

### The VSKA project

The Visible Skills of Adults (VSKA) is an Erasmus+ Key Action 3 Project, filed under the call priority theme of "Employment and Skills: validation of informal and non-formal learning in Education and Training." The project partners aim to address the European policy priority of diminishing skills mismatch by making knowledge, skills and competences of adults more visible through consideration of the practice of validation of informal and non-formal learning and implementation of field trials.

In particular, VSKA addresses the need to make the skills of low-qualified adults, migrants<sup>1</sup>, asylum seekers<sup>2</sup> and refugees<sup>3</sup> more visible, in order to enhance their employability, improve their access to education and training offers and support active engagement in society. Along with unemployed and low-skilled or low-qualified adults in general, these target groups are currently at a disadvantage in European societies and could benefit from improved access to validation services and from more holistic validation arrangements.

The VSKA project plans to implement and evaluate five interventions, agreed by the partners and applied to the current processes (in the respective national contexts) for the validation of prior learning. The interventions have been developed and agreed with a view to making the knowledge, skills and competence of migrants, asylum seekers, refugees and adults with low skills<sup>4</sup> levels, more

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<sup>1</sup>The UN Convention on the Rights of Migrants defines a migrant worker as a "person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national". It is generally considered that the decision to migrate is taken freely by the individual concerned.

<sup>2</sup>Asylum seekers are people seeking protection as refugees, who are waiting for the authorities to decide on their applications. They are legally entitled to stay in the state until their application for protection is decided.

<sup>3</sup>According to the Convention and Protocol relating to the status of refugees (1951) 'A refugee ... is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.' (UNHCR, 2010)

<sup>4</sup>Throughout the project proposal reference is made to low-skilled adults. The project team and indeed the nature of the project clearly recognises that this target group is likely to have many valuable skills and that it would be more appropriate to consider this group as those having low, or no, formal qualifications. This recognition is at the core of the project

visible. While there will be differences across the participating countries in relation to validation policies, practices and infrastructures; the focus of the project team will be to learn how the chosen interventions, when enacted, can bring about real change, for individuals and systems and to collate the learning from the project to contribute to a broader policy agenda.

The five planned interventions are as follows:

**Intervention 1:**

Developing and extending regional/national networks and partnerships to include policy makers, social partners and practitioners working on the validation of NFIL

**Intervention 2:**

Extending / adapting tools used in the validation of NFIL – includes digitisation as well as customisation for use with specific beneficiary groups and enhanced quality assurance of validation processes

**Intervention 3:**

Creating a common set of criteria for the documentation and assessment of transversal skills, able to be used with one or more adult learner groups

**Intervention 4:**

Training and / or Capacity building for guidance counsellors and other frontline staff working on the validation of NFIL, including with specific adult beneficiary groups

**Intervention 5:**

Improving access to and awareness of validation services and support among specific adult beneficiary groups

The aim of the VISKA project is that, through developing, trialling and evaluating these interventions:

1. The processes to implement effective validation services, supporting networks and staff development will be mapped.
2. The criteria, success factors and conditions of processes that contribute to outcomes of validation are identified.

3. Case studies will be made available to be analysed by policy makers and other key policy influencers to understand key challenges and success factors in developing robust systems and processes in complex policy areas such as validation.
4. The policy processes that play a role in influencing validation development will be identified and described.

### The VISKA research and evaluation

The VISKA evaluation has two main aims. The first is to understand, evaluate and enhance validation across the four participating countries. The evaluation also aims to provide country specific insights and case studies that can be analysed by policy makers seeking to understand the inherent challenges and opportunities within validation for low-skilled, migrants and refugees.

The evaluation focuses on systems, processes and outcomes, enabling the identification of the varying success factors across the different national contexts. This will help to inform the structural supports necessary to empower stakeholders and policy makers/ influencers in other partner countries with regard to validation of prior learning.

Four research questions underpinned the VISKA research and evaluation.

1. To what degree did partners achieve the implementation aim across the five intervention strategies, and what factors at local, regional and national and policy level appeared to influence the achievement of implementation aims?
2. What outcomes were achieved for what groups, and to what degree?
3. What factors were associated with the achievement of positive learner outcomes?
4. What policy-level factors were associated with the achievement of positive learner outcomes?

The evaluation consisted of a number of stages:

1. A pre-implementation stage: activities centred on establishing the existing baseline practices, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats within the four partner countries.
2. Ongoing data collection from the various stakeholders engaged in the VISKA project
3. Data collection and subsequent report on interim results
4. Data collection, data analysis and final reporting

In the case of Ireland data collection and evaluation was conducted by QQI. However, it is essential to note from the outset, that

- Ireland did not conduct field trials arising from the early unanticipated withdrawal of the implementation partner
- This withdrawal somewhat dislocates the current situation from some of the early 'as is' (VISKA Deliverable D2.2) which would have formed a basis for an evaluation of progress based on a set of actions which did not subsequently happen; and for those that did, there is now no 'as is' or specific literature review targeting for example a field trial of migrants and refugees with guidance personnel as the primary implementers, against which to evaluate progress or 'distance travelled'.
- QQI was not an agreed field trial data collector within the project from the outset and did not participate in training as a data collector
- As an exceptional measure, and at a late stage in the project, a small scale testing ((VISKA Deliverable D3.1) was initiated of the EU Skills Profiling tool to present findings which can be compared to the results of other implementation partners in collaboration with four ETBs and one Community Education centre, testing the use of the EU Skills Profiling Tool with 32 asylum seekers and refugees and data collected according to an agreed format, with outputs of feedback submitted to CIT(see further below); an additional nuance is added in that this testing was conducted mainly by guidance personnel which community and relationship with validation was never planned as a key focus within the VISKA Ireland project.
- The QQI revised role, following the loss of the implementation partner within the project was agreed at the April 2018 meeting of the Consortia and includes reflection, consultation and feedback to the project, and dissemination with interest prioritised in policy type implications and possibilities. An additional challenge in this arose from being in the 'slipstream' of other partners learning about discussion and dissemination particularly in the late stages of the project.
- While every effort was made to gather feedback from stakeholders nationally at all points in the VISKA project and to document process, of necessity this results in different data, analysis and reporting than from other partners. Directly attributable outcomes and impacts are modest nationally.

### VISKA project in Ireland

In Ireland, QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) is an independent State agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland. QQI has a broad remit across education and training in Ireland. In the area of quality assurance, QQI is responsible for reviewing the effectiveness of quality assurance in further and higher education and training providers in Ireland. As a VISKA project partner, QQI operates as a delegated body

of the Department of Education and Skills in Ireland and aimed to disseminate useful and practical information on international approaches and good practice on the recognition of prior learning of adults. It was hoped that the VSKA project would inform the development of a national policy in this area and the building of a network of practitioners through which localisation of approaches and tools would be achieved, in parallel with certain other national validation initiatives.

In Ireland the National Advisory Group for VSKA gave an opportunity to interact with key stakeholders, assisting in the development of an informed basis for contributions on policy and practice. In addition, some feedback on the use of the European Skills Profiling Tool with adults in Ireland are included in the overall project findings.

The extent to which validation remains referenced as a priority in national policies, strategies and funding programmes for VSKA target groups, i.e. people who are low skilled and or qualified, including migrants and refugees, lies in the spirit of an overarching commitment to social inclusion and enhancing employability or upskilling within employment, including across policies determined by a range of government departments.

At national policy level, planning and funding programmes seek to acknowledge and address challenges through multiple measures. The Department of Education and Skills has established an Upskilling Pathways Steering Group whose membership mirrors much of the constitution of the National Advisory Group, including across government departments.

Over the duration of the VSKA project, references to validation (RPL) have grown in general documentation as has awareness among education and training providers nationally of the need to continue to enhance responsiveness and efficiencies systemically.

However, while VSKA contributed to awareness raising of validation and what it can achieve for the target group among others, for providers and practitioners, it is not possible to directly and solely attribute this rise in awareness only to VSKA.

#### The aim of VSKA

The VSKA project aimed to implement a policy experiment, informed by field trials, to identify possible policy implications at regional, national and European level derived from making the knowledge, skills and competence of certain adult cohorts visible through validation. It was hoped that validation would shorten people's distance to employment, targeted education or training offers or more active engagement in society. This was to be done focusing on five related 'interventions'.

In Ireland, the nature of participation changed from original conception; arising from technical challenges associated with funding distribution, it was not possible for the partner leading field trials and implementation to continue working with VISKA. The adapted grant agreement was agreed in March 2018 with the EACEA, with a subsequent plan agreed with the Consortia in April 2018. The aim from that point on therefore was to consider and reflect, in the slip stream of learning from field trials conducted in Belgium (Flanders), Iceland and Norway in as much as was possible, general policy implications. We also sought to contribute actively, including through consultation with experts nationally, to the development of instruments and concepts within VISKA. This in turn stimulated and situated development in a developing dynamic national context. The commitment to VISKA, and much work on VISKA occurred prior to the establishment of the Upskilling Pathways Steering Group or the Skills to Advance Policy Framework, for example.

### VISKA in Ireland

Primary role VISKA activities were the hosting of the National Advisory Group and associated Focus Groups and workshops, with some on-line consultation among expert practitioner groupings to inform the developmental phase of the project. VISKA learning and observations were also shared across other areas of activity as both dissemination and networking.

Ireland engaged as discussant with all the project interventions, most frequently as a reflective partner contributing to thinking and development.

As an exceptional measure, VISKA testing of the on-line competence self-assessment tool, the EU Skills Profiling Tool (D3.1) was conducted on a small scale, as a digital tool for possible application within validation services to be used by front line and guidance staff.

The strongest characteristic of VISKA in Ireland was the level of consultation and networking through Focus Groups in order to gather expert views to bring back to the project team. This also is consistent with objectives to stimulate consideration of how best to meet the needs of the cohort within national and regional policy and practice, including in consideration of regional infrastructure.

VISKA testing of the on-line competence self-assessment tool, the EU Skills Profiling Tool (D3.1):

VISKA tests were formally conducted for one aspect of the project, on a small scale with the EU Skills Profiling Tool, in four Education and Training Board (ETB) centres and in one Community Education Centre, with thirty-two clients who are refugee and migrants. Centres were rural and urban.

The tests were conducted with the kind support of the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) and Aontas, the National Adult Learning Organisation. This external support optimised dissemination, awareness and potential impact for the project at both policy and practice levels,

including beyond the life of the project. Within the ETBs, Guidance Counsellors implemented the tests; the Community Education Centre would link with other Community Education Practitioner Front Line Staff through the Aontas Community Education Network.

In Ireland the primary target learner group for Viska was people who had low levels of qualifications and or skills, which might include people who are migrants and refugees.

The Viska test concerned refugee and asylum seekers.

However, discussion and consideration of Viska as a project was situated in a wide-ranging national context impacting multiple sectors and sub cohorts as appropriate to the project interventions.

People who have low levels of skills and or qualifications participate in multiple ways and settings in society and are often in employment. It was felt therefore that meeting the need of the target learner cohort required both broad and nuanced holistic consideration.

### About this report

This report is drafted within a template common to all partner countries and the research methodology set out below describes that for all field trials conducted. However, as noted, Ireland did not conduct field trials and data contributions are drawn from the National Advisory Group, associated and other Networks, and the user's experiences from the testing of the EU Skills Profiling Tool. The report therefore differs from other Viska country reports, some sections being unanswered and some template elements sitting more comfortably than others.

## Methodology

This section summarises the research and evaluation methodology and how the evaluation protocol is being supported and implemented in each participating country. The methodology is influenced by the complexity of the project aspirations and by the variation in the contexts for the project in practice. In summary the research and evaluation activities of the VISKA project had a number of objectives. It was intended to support the field trials or interventions by guiding the development of an evaluative framework, through both formative measures and a summative assessment of impacts. Another objective was to extract evidence and analysis that would contribute to future policy and practice progression in validation processes.

### Evaluation design and methods

In developing the methodological framework for VISKA the realities within which the project would be undertaken were influential.

- The project context in each of the project partner countries including variations in:
  - Target cohort for the project intervention – influenced by the policy aim and environment
  - Target cohort size
  - Economic and social imperatives for the project
  - Legislative and regulatory framework for VPL
- The project partners in each country have varying roles and responsibilities in relation to VPL
- Partners have selected the interventions in which they will take part and which are relevant for their organisations and their setting
- The project resources are finite and are rightly focused on the implementation of the interventions and the identification of transferable policy implications rather than the research and evaluation.

In addition, the make-up of the project partnership and therefore the practical ability to undertake the implementation of the field trials changed during the course of the project which added to the complexity of the task.

As indicated in the proposal document it was not anticipated that an experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation could be achieved, nor indeed might it be desirable in the circumstances. It was clear at the proposal stage that the identified target cohorts for the interventions would not be a representative sample of the available population subgroup within the country but would be chosen with reference to economic imperatives, skills gaps, accessibility, willingness and coherence. Indeed, it was also clear that these imperatives might

change during the course of the project.

A (modified) **Realist Evaluation** approach has been adopted which allows the contexts for the interventions enacted under the project to form a real background to the interpretation of the findings and the project focuses on the collection of rich information around the practice setting which contributes to the later extraction of value in the policy domain. This interplay between the contexts and the actions comes to the fore throughout the project. As propounded by Pawson and Tilley <sup>5</sup>– the question in Realist Evaluations is: *What works, for whom and in what circumstances?* Generally a realist programme theory specifies which mechanisms (changes or interventions in our case) will generate the outcomes and what features of the context will affect whether or not those mechanisms work to achieve a desired or anticipated result. Ideally, these elements (mechanisms, outcome, context) are reflected on at the evaluation design stage, as it enables to design the data collection to focus on testing the different elements of the programme theory.

In adopting the Realist Evaluation approach the VISKA project team considered the relevant aspects of the context such as the legislative and regulatory setting, the views of the stakeholders of the Viska project as well as conducting a pre-trial SWOT analysis across the five interventions. The interventions had been agreed by the project team at the proposal stage with a view to the desired outcomes and the research methods include collection of both qualitative and quantitative data sets. Realist evaluation provides a structure to explore change brought about by an intervention by referring to the actors who act and change (or not) a situation under specific conditions and under the influence of external events (including the intervention itself). In the VISKA project, the project partners are embedded in the social reality of their particular context and that influences how the intervention is implemented and how actors respond to it (or not). The project partnership adopts an open and collaborative approach which recognises the project partners as experts within their own context and practice setting. To ensure the work is completed in an efficient and cost effective manner CIT has leveraged the experience of JD Carpentieri - through a subcontracting arrangement - whose expertise in the design of interventions, deployment of field trials and research and evaluation frameworks for the ongoing *Guidance and Orientation Pilots for Adult Learners (GOAL)* project has been of considerable value in reviewing materials and providing guidance on process steps and the research and evaluation methodology. Two of the partners of the VISKA project were partners of the GOAL project so their expertise in policy experimentation projects has also been leveraged to ensure efficient transfer of knowledge and practice.

<sup>5</sup> Pawson, R., & Tilley, N. (1997). *Realistic Evaluation*. Sage.

## Collection of Data for the Project

The interventions in the project proposal are phrased in very general terms and the project team has worked to find common activities that can be the basis for the collection of comparable data arising from the varied field trials that are planned. However, the project team and the research and evaluation partners have been sensitive to the different contexts and differing challenges experienced by the partners in relation to VPL, while keeping to the fore the requirement to make a policy contribution at a local, national and European level. This has resulted in a very collaborative approach to developing the framework for research and data collection throughout the project. It also has informed the evaluation focus of the project in line with the Realistic Evaluation ethos.

The research protocol document and research instruments were developed collaboratively by the project partners, following from data collection workshops to enable consistent and comparable data gathering during the development and trial of the various tools and the field trials of the VISKA project. It also supports the collection of rich and valuable information from all project participants based on their experiences of the project.

In addition to the defined common and comparable data to be gathered by each of the field trial partners it was recognised that there may well be local and national nuances which impact the implementation of validation within partner countries providing the rich context for the Realistic Evaluation Process. Data related to these specifics will also be decided upon and gathered locally and interpreted in the context of the local situation as well as extrapolating potential impact for Europe as a whole, where appropriate.

The target groups for the field trials are not generally numerous enough at each location to allow statistically significant conclusions to be drawn. It is also recognised that the field trial participants are not likely to be fully representative of the migrant, refugee or low skilled population across Europe or, indeed within the partner countries. These populations tend to change from time to time in response to local and international pressures and the target cohort for the project will be generally in line with the aims of the participant country at the time of the project proposal.

However, the findings and conclusions of the project will be based on the empirical data gathered from the field trial participants, frontline and guidance staff, the National Advisory Groups (NAG), and importantly from the project partners themselves in the partner countries. In all cases the project partners will be working with adult learners who for one reason or another will benefit from opportunities to have their learning recognised and validated and this will provide valuable transferable learning for others.

Together the project partners have considered what information can be collected, from whom and at

which stage in the project. This is summarised in Figure 2 below. The project partnership considered at the proposal stages the potential sources of information and the mechanisms by which information could be collected and shared. As detailed in the Proposal the project essentially has three main stages:

1. Detailed mapping process to establish existing practices and contexts.
2. Field trials consisting of implementation of selected interventions.
3. Analysis and evaluation – collective consideration of policy impacts.

There are also a number of important sources of data and information which will be significant before, during and after the project activities. These sources include:

- Members of the National Advisory Groups and other key stakeholders and policy actors
- Frontline and Guidance staff involved in validation of prior learning
- Clients and learners accessing or seeking to access validation services
- Members of the project team in each partner organisation

#### Detailed mapping process to establish existing practices and contexts

The detailed mapping to establish existing practices and to set the baseline ‘as is’ for the project was conducted by each of the project partners within their particular context. The research and evaluation partners provided the research protocol document and research framework for the submissions by each partner. The detailed mapping report included the perspectives of the different stakeholders included in the Viska project which include the support worker and the policy maker. A pre-trial SWOT analysis across the five interventions were also conducted in the four partner countries. The purpose of this was to ascertain areas in need of development which may be addressed through Viska. Field Trials consisting of implementation of selected interventions

Depending on the source of the data, the size of the target group and the stage in the project consideration was given to a number of different tools and methods by which data could be collected and shared. Both quantitative and qualitative data sets were anticipated and to ensure mutual understanding and consistency a data collection methodology workshop was held with the various partners. A handbook was developed to support the processes and to address issues related to ethics, data protection and other common items of concern. The data collection methodologies of most interest for the project team include: interviews, focus groups and surveys or questionnaires.

Again working collaboratively a complete question set was developed in October 2018. This document provided clear templates which had been agreed by the partners would form the basis of the Interim and Final reports (D5.1 and D5.2). The guideline provided detailed questions to be asked of stakeholders, staff and learners and the appropriate time throughout the project duration.

Recognising that the partners would be working in various languages survey questions were provided but a survey instrument was not mandated, question guides were provided for focus groups and interviews; but it was recognised that the context and setting would require some flexibility for each of the partners.

This report is a summary of the information collected to date and it recognises that the partners are at various stages of completion with the field trials and the data collection exercises. Where appropriate information has been presented in quantitative or tabular form using mainly descriptive statistics and in other cases quotations are provided at this point. Due to different implementation frameworks, different interventions of interest and different target cohorts the timeframe for the collection of data as well as the data collected varied across the consortium. There were also issues in relation to the deadlines which had been agreed for the collection of information for this interim report and in relation to the consistency of the data to be collected across the partnership.

#### Analysis and Evaluation- collective consideration of policy impacts

The main analysis of the data emerging from the project will form the basis of deliverable D5.2 which is the synthesis report of the VISKA project. Qualitative data from the various focus groups and interviews will be analysed through a thematic framework. The topics for that analysis will be informed by the guides which had been developed and will have particular relevance to policy implications. The project partners will be key to ensuring that the information has been appropriately interpreted, that the context for the intervention and the resulting data is well- described and that any conclusions are appropriately drawn. This will ensure a robust and reliable output.

#### Interim reporting

A cross country synthesis interim report was published in May 2019. Interim key findings are available at <https://viskaproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/D5.1-Final-document.pdf> A key aim of the interim report which contained data collected through Ireland, up to March 2019 was to analyse and share early key reflections in order to inform future validation development.

The findings of the interim report are integrated into the final report.

#### Research methodology by Ireland

VISKA Ireland conducted a small-scale test of the experience of using the EU Skills Profile Tool with refugees and migrants on request of project partners mid-stream was carried out within the project, to support the project outcomes. Initially this intervention was to have been coordinated by one of the other data gathering partners, with the connection to the on-the-ground-participants facilitated by QQI. No research or literature review had been conducted to baseline the cohort needs or

educational attainment, and the trial itself was conducted over an intensive, short period of time. The cohort differed from the anticipated cohort for the VISKA Ireland project referenced in the original literature review.

The research for the original Literature Review was largely led by ETBI in partnership with QQI and involved five interviews with a range of national stakeholders at policy level and five at practice level; However, no national field trials were subsequently conducted against which change might be measured. Data collectors were not appointed or trained in line with other partners practice, and nor was data gathered.

### Participant Sample

The small-scale field trial tested the EU Skills Profiling Tool testing a digital tool for self-assessment of skills, knowledge and competence with five providers engaging with learners who were refugees and migrants (under Deliverable D3.1). This collaboration was rapidly constructed with the kind support of the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE), Education and Training Boards (ETBs), and Aontas, the National Learning Organisation. Providers were invited to support the project on the proximity to a relatively large-scale number of refugees or migrants to make a cohort accessible at short notice and on the basis of their familiarity with the project. The providers who agreed to participate were not all those originally envisaged for participation in the original design of VISKA. Actual participants (clients) in the trials were invited locally, frequently with respect for availability and a degree of language skill and familiarity with the education and training services of the region. In other words, relationship with the service provider conducting the test would have already been established to some degree.

### Quantitative data

Field trial data was collected using a survey with the results forwarded as raw data to CIT. The staff and learners who worked with the EU Skills Profiling Tool were invited to complete the survey.

Ten staff supported thirty-two learners/clients to complete the tool. This exceeded the request of the project partners which aimed for a target of twenty- five learners/clients.

### Qualitative data

Qualitative data was gathered over telephone conversations, email exchange and through participation in the National Advisory Group (NAG) meetings where feedback was directly given.

Qualitative data gathered through direct dialogue was with the co-ordinating Contact person at the Provider.

## Data analysis

The raw data was collated within QQI using Survey Monkey.

## Methodological challenges

VISKA Ireland committed to test in five centres with twenty-five learners from the outset; as the trial progressed, ten staff trialled with thirty-two learners.

This would not be a statistically representative sample. Practitioners leading trials are experienced staff and would make valid and representative observations informed by breadth of experience including working with the cohort.

Challenges for mentors/ frontline staff and guidance conducting the trial arose largely at operational level from the timing of the trials, which altered from original scheduled plans at the time of request for participation. This created practical challenges in recruitment and selection of learners/clients as in one centre in particular, enrolment had only just taken place in the required period. For others the trial period fell close to leave periods.

Quantitative data challenges included that the field trial while small in scale exceeded the target requested cohort; from a quantitative perspective, every effort was made at local level to support project outcomes.

Technically, within the tool, there was an issue with the quantity of questions, so that some questions were left unanswered, possibly through 'questionnaire fatigue', the tool being trialled, and the subsequent evaluation requiring many responses.

Qualitative data challenges included that the agreed brief was that five guidance/front line staff would test the EU Skills Profiling Tool with five learners each and return feedback on their and the learner/client experience of using the tool.

No case studies were planned or gathered as part of this field trial.

## Key methodological limitations

Some methodological limitations impacted potentially on the findings of this work. Survey Monkey was used as a data collection tool. This necessitated a particular style of question which may have led to less rich data, as may the scale and pace of the trials.

Anecdotal data noted in phone conversations, emails and finally through the contribution of Guidance Practitioners in the NAG was rich. The longer-term impacts through Aontas and NCGE are qualitatively more interesting if yet formative; Aontas continue to invest in staff development and

training in validation practices, discussing the topic with practitioners in the field through Community Education Networks and also within the RPL Practitioner Network. NCGE equally continue to explore practices and approaches to supporting validation and its phases with Guidance practitioners within services and in the interface with clients, including with reference to appropriate tools.

## Programme Participants and Stakeholders

### Programme staff

The testing of the EU Skills Profiling Tool (VSKA Deliverable D3.1) were conducted over a short intensive period of time. While initial contact was made with the Guidance Service in April, with a view to trialling in early Autumn, the trial itself did not take place until January 2018.

### Key findings

The key learning lies principally in the discussion around the process from the field trials with those who conducted them and with the NAG in June 2019. Again, the design of the testing, did not include a meeting with those who conducted them, but four of the five were kindly able to participate in the National Advisory Group discussion on this experience. This contributed significantly to insight and learning. It is a testament to the commitment of their services and of the individuals themselves to learning about and improving validation policy, practice and experiences for learners that this was so.

Findings in relation to the tool are recorded in the chapter treating of extending and adapting tools.

The linkage to VSKA concerns and habits was striking in discussion relating to the

- value of focussed evaluation and reflection on practice 'in the round' with a range of perspectives from policy and practice
- a concern with cultural sensitivity in engagement, and in the design of any materials used at any point in a person's experience with a service including validation
- the range and gap in experience in working with diversity of cultures even within the NAG and the potential impact that this could have in decision making- guidance counsellors and front-line staff and practitioners experience and knowledge outweighed others distant from service; this underscores the value of aligning policy makers and practitioners experiences and of diverse policy and practice perspectives being engaged
- the implications for training of our changing cultural profiles
- practical issues with the management of translators, reflecting one of the aspects of effective inclusion

## Key Implications

Implications for policy and helpful messages might include that

1. Validation seeks to become an integral part of FET services, routinely available to learners in employment, in communities and seeking to access programmes and awards. In order to do this the value of validation must be evidenced. Therefore, work in progress must have the facility to be documented, reflected on, evaluated and to inform a nuanced implementation of appropriate infrastructure, quality assurance, data collection, supports, training and other measures.
2. Some concerns that arise in addressing the needs of this specific cohort are not specific to validation activity but relate to cultural change nationally. Validation services have an opportunity to bridge and acknowledge histories for people. However, validation services do not bear the cost for cultural diversity training in assessment methodologies for example. Some concerns are shared across all activities.
3. Diversity of voices engaged in consideration of how to enable progress, both across practice and policy is helpful.

## Implications for future validation development

Based on this learning it may be helpful therefore to:

1. Build in reflection and evaluation across a range of lens from the outset.
2. NARIC and validation are natural partners and good starting points in engagement for some clients.
3. A 'VISKA-like validation initiative' might involve multiple partners across several jurisdictions; a narrow focus is helpful, and a simple process useful, notwithstanding the diversity of practice in different jurisdiction. Too many tools and interventions can overly complicate actions.

## The VSKA Validation process

This chapter provides an overview of the VSKA validation process. The development of validation across Europe is varied and more so amongst the low skilled, migrant and refugee cohorts. The national developments in validation and the diversity amongst these populations make validation a greater challenge to embed in national systems and processes within education or employment. Ireland has committed to implementing the 2012 Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Validation in Ireland gives access to full and partial qualifications, to access to programmes, advanced entry, exemptions from parts of programmes and credits, albeit unevenly and depending on individual providers policies. All four stages of a validation process are applied, i.e. identification, documentation, assessment and certification.

Much of the development of validation, not related to VSKA, but within which VSKA learning is considered, within further education and training (FET) has been organic and dynamic, with accelerated change in the last two years.

Several VSKA contemporaneous projects at quasi national level have assisted in developing confidence, skills, toolkits and local approaches including tentative infrastructure as appropriate to individual contexts, in implementing validation for certain cohorts, principally people with low levels of qualifications and or skills mainly in employment. Challenges remain, including the need to consolidate linkages for disadvantaged groups who are marginalised, working with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and Voluntary and Community and Youth Sectors, and to provide for co-ordination. Discussion among practitioners is engaged, informed and reflective, supported by active networks such as the RPL Practitioner Network Ireland (<https://rpl-ireland.ie/>).

The VSKA project and outcomes are considered in this lively confluence of activities and networks, including the possibility of the EU Skills Profiling tool to contribute to the identification of skills for migrants and refugees, albeit at a late stage of the project. To our knowledge, VSKA is the only focused validation activity for refugees and migrants, and indeed did not start out with that intention.

### Validation activities and processes

In the broad context of validation projects in FET, while projects are not yet evaluated or documented, through work with networks and communities of practice it is clear that people who apply for validation are highly motivated.

It is also clear that an outcome of the process of validation is enhanced confidence and motivation,

such as to increase engagement with further learning and development. Over the lifetime of the VISKA project, some 300 learners in parallel projects outside of VISKA have participated in validation leading to major and minor awards at levels 2-6 of the National Framework of Qualifications. Almost all would have had low prior formal educational qualifications and or experience. Some found that validation identified 'gap analysis' where additional access to programmes or parts of programmes were made available in order to enable attainment of the target awards, but equally many prepared portfolios of assessment that met award requirements entirely on the basis of prior experiential or nonformal learning. Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) will conduct an evaluation of some of this work in 2020.

The testing of the EU Skills Profiling tool adds another thirty-two to this number, for the identification phase of validation only, and further significant numbers have achieved certification outcomes using the pre-existing NALA Write-on programme which enables validation digitally, effectively through a skills challenge approach.

VISKA itself has not led to any direct validation.

## Validation activities and processes: Qualitative findings

### Key findings

VISKA raised a number of thematic reflections for national consideration within a generally evolving and dynamic validation system and process. Where opportunities arose the VISKA project and ongoing learning was shared in networking and general events.

Thematic reflections, arising from networking through the National Advisory Group and other fora include

- The importance of networks and of ongoing systematic reflection, joining policy and practice including as it is experienced by both front-line staff and learners. This model is also proposed as a way forward by stakeholders in recent QQI comprehensive consultation on assessment reflecting on validation.
- Nationally significant progress has been made in relation to validation practices; in parallel strategic planning and targeted initiatives are being implemented in relation to the cohorts of learners prioritised in VISKA. Validation has a relatively low profile within this work. It would be helpful to marry the two with specific national projects. This links to the VISKA intervention on raising awareness of validation, which the Advisory Group would have felt was premature.
- Within such an action it would be useful to draw on VISKA partner experiences in relation to

working with public employment services and from a HR perspective as opposed perhaps a provision-oriented perspective. The Review of Guidance when Recommendations are implemented might explore links for Guidance in such spheres for validation, and the capacity to assist in bridge building. In Ireland, Guidance does not ‘do’ validation; in other national traditions, guidance is embedded within validation processes differently and it may be that it is more from a HR competency perspective than nationally is currently anticipated.

- Equally actions might address visibility of validation services at regional level, points of contact and information needs, means to provide for appropriate professional development, infrastructural development and measures to track benefits /return on investment in validation to the individual, provider of validation services, employer, community etc.
- Measures to evaluate the value of validation should not be predicated purely on certification outputs but reflect also on process and e.g. motivational outcomes.
- The development of effective digital multilingual tools is clearly complex but desirable. Challenges include managing expectations and supporting practical outputs that ‘fit’ what learners want and what is useful in a national context. It may make sense to ‘chunk’ elements such as occupational skills which worked well for most and to use that as the core part from which to build a personal story. Skills for Work provides an effective strategy nationally, while not digital. Such approaches may equally not work at all for other cohorts. Coherence with the Europass Decision and toolkit is important.
- Validation of transversal skills in the national setting thus far has been effective and led by the learner’s own experience. VISKA however points to a larger embedding of overt consideration of transversal across education and training practices, which may require different cultural approaches and training etc.
- It is easier for communities of practice to form within homogenous sectors rather than around the learner/cohort to be served. Validation is entirely predicated on a person-centred approach and offers a unique opportunity for cross sectoral engagement.

### Key implications

Implications point to the opportunity for national cross sectoral and multi-actor co-ordination of specific validation actions in the implementation of national strategies taking account of VISKA learning.

### Implications for future validation process development

Collaborative approaches work well; action is required. Lack of confidence can paralyse but beginning a process gives courage for the next steps. Peer support is essential. Organisational commitment is also critical.

National projects have practiced roles differently but with the same phases and outcomes. It will be very helpful to see the outcomes of the ETBI evaluation of these projects.

### Policy implications

Key policy messages are drawn from discussions within the NAG and within other associated Networks (Intervention 2) and are informed by the broader confluence of validation concurrent projects within which VISKA learning and deliverables were situated. They echo that of other partners in many instances.

The evidence consistently from practitioners engaging in validation in VET is that the process is as valuable if not more so, than the certification outcome. The capacity to 'own' and articulate learning and achievement is transformative and enables the learner to take hold of and optimise new opportunities, frequently un-envisaged. This was evidenced in the VISKA testing of the EU Skills Profiling Tool, limited though it was.

Co-ordination and visibility of validation policy, strategy and services is optimum for ready recognition of knowledge, skill and competence howsoever acquired.

Skills are needed to enable validation process, not only in interface with learners but also in interpreting experience against Learning Outcomes. In the context of workplaces, occupational standards, HR records this can be a very different place to start from that traditionally or even from that in dialogue with learners.

Developing the skills for validation takes time and effort. CPD takes account of this, but again sometimes in the context of assessment, working with learning outcomes, equality and diversity training and so on. Defining the competence, 'validation practitioner' may be heavily culturally informed, taking into account infrastructure across different systems of provision, regions and jurisdiction.

### *Implications of policy*

Nationally there are a wide range of policies, funding programmes and policy implementation frameworks referencing validation. All fall under two similar objectives, social inclusion and enhancing competitiveness.

The opportunity for visible national coordination, signposting of services, data tracking progress is clear with the gap narrowing incrementally as systems and services improve. The need to protect and nurture progress is clear, including with staff engaged and developing specialist skills in validation but sometimes on precarious contracts- part of the larger organisational challenges of many services.

In the field trial i.e. testing the EU Skills Profiling Tool (VISKA Deliverable D.3.1), the staff engaged

were largely experienced guidance practitioners, some of whom are also involved in other national validation projects and with related networks. Arising from this awareness of and engagement with concepts in validation has grown across this community of practice with increasing clarity as to modes of appropriate engagement in the national context. At regional level policies are evolving informed by ongoing action learning approaches, including through VSKA.

#### *Implications for policy*

VSKA engagement both nationally and across partner countries has made clear that for this cohort deemed low qualified and or low skilled, that there are abundant skills to be made visible and that the process of doing this is valuable beyond the formal recognition itself.

It is recommended therefore that a requirement for validation proofing be inbuilt to funding streams addressing this cohort on a voluntary basis, so that at minimum a person has an opportunity to evaluate whether this process is one that might provide an opportunity for them.

Where specific target cohorts' needs are being addressed, a mapping of service networks may be useful, including Human Resource, Public Employment Service, career management and guidance and other service providers and opportunity makers. Such networks might consider opportunities for validation and recognition and explore ways of monitoring progress specifically with regard to meeting the needs of the cohort on a client-oriented basis rather than on a sectoral basis.

## Developing and extending regional/national networks

### Building and sustaining networks

Validation in a European context is often associated with the concept of 'bridge building' between sectors, agencies, constituencies some of which of themselves might not easily or naturally come together. Individual citizens obviously move fluidly and freely among such social and cultural structures, learning and achieving regardless of context. The risks of structural fragmentation, lack of coherence, patchy development and inconsistency can be characteristics of any emergent practice and can impede effective services to citizens. In order to underpin and enable the provision of an effective validation system ultimately, the well-established 'partnership' model in Ireland is a preferred model of national engagement. Thus, the VISKA intervention 'building and sustaining networks' is seen as an essential tool in the development of enhanced validation systems and practices.

The aspiration to establish 'the required national partnerships' was clearly articulated in the grant submission so as to aid the development of existing tools and services and to provide for the quality assurance of any activities. The application consistently acknowledged the role of Ministries (Department of Education and Skills, Department of Employment and Social Protection), ETBI, NCGE, SOLAS, ETBs, NALA, Aontas, the RPL Practitioner Network Ireland. It was hoped that through focused periodic work together that thematic networking and collaboration would deepen in impact and that a common vision and consensus on the value of validation in making skills and qualifications more visible and comparable would emerge. Implementation of trials initially was perceived as occurring through ETBI with on-the-ground- trialling and liaison occurring through the ETBs with support from Aontas and NALA. Over the period of the VISKA project what was not predicted was the range of dynamic parallel activities in validation nationally and the positive impetus that this would give to the consideration of the National Advisory Group drawing together and situating the learning from VISKA.

The principle aims nationally in committing to this intervention was to provide reciprocity between learning, reflection and insight development between policy and practice and back to policy from different perspectives. This was believed to be important in terms of building sustainable, inclusive and respectful systems, services and processes, from a sectoral, regional and national perspective. This engagement, applied to VISKA tools and thinking, might inform possible lessons for policy, or considerations to be referenced in policy development.

At the time of inception, the VISKA National Advisory Group was unusual in that to our knowledge there were no other cross organisational working groups focused on validation specifically nor on

validation for the cohort identified, i.e. people with low levels of skill or qualification, including migrants and refugees.

The RPL Practitioner Network is cross sectoral but is 'bottom up' and exerts 'soft power' through the engagement of members in concerns they themselves raise. Both remain solely focused on validation.<sup>6</sup>

Over the duration of the VISKA project positive change has continued to emerge nationally. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) has established a Steering Group to identify appropriate measures to implement the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation, providing for co-ordinated national action and evaluation, in which validation is a part of activities. SOLAS, responsible for funding, planning and co-ordinating further education and training (FET) in Ireland has launched specific initiatives providing for validation, and has amended data collection and funding request mechanisms to provide for validation as the sole means of achieving certification - both decisions richly informed by collaborative dialogue within the FET sector. ETBI has committed to evaluate in 2020 a validation project originally designed to operate in harness with VISKA with the potential to contribute to answering a core question at the heart of the VISKA project: whether making the skills of adults visible in the form of qualifications diminishes skills mismatch or underemployment? While VISKA partners believed from the outset that making our skills and capacities visible including through validation processes would benefit individuals, societies and labour markets, ensuring continued economic competitiveness, and also believed that this was particularly important as a protection for people with low levels of qualifications and or skills, providing an evidence base over three years will remain challenging. None the less, signals regarding outcomes of validation processes for people within the VISKA cohorts nationally, but outside the VISKA project by virtue of events, are encouraging. NALA has commenced an international KA3 Erasmus+ project testing a scalable approach to providing skills audits for adults with low skills, using a digital tool.<sup>7</sup> The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) offered, at the RPL Practitioner Network Meeting of May 2019, to 'host a conversation' of relevant stakeholders to inform national policy on the role and relationship of guidance and RPL, based on the 2008 Council Resolution on integrating Guidance into Lifelong Learning Strategies, and including specific reference to learning from the VISKA project and others<sup>8</sup>. Other working groups are establishing to address specific aspects of validation relating

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<sup>6</sup>(see: <https://rpl-ireland.ie/> )

<sup>7</sup>(See <https://citoproject.eu/> )

<sup>8</sup>. ( <https://rpl-ireland.ie/jennifer-mckenzie-director-national-centre-for-guidance-in-education-ncge/> )

to programme design and delivery e.g. in the context of new apprenticeships; these will for the first time provide validation opportunities nationally through quality assured provision where the applicant has relevant experiential and / or other learning.

These emergent networks show the desire nationally among stakeholders to provide effective validation services through detailed consideration of relevant strategic and practical aspects arising in the realisation of services. All equally signal how, with national co-ordination, the VISKA outputs are made visible, connected and optimised strategically. The RPL Practitioner Network provides a mechanism for elements of sharing to occur on a voluntary basis.

### Existence and scope of partnerships and networks

The National Advisory Group (NAG) was the primary network concerned with VISKA. Members in many instances were representatives of multiple other existing relevant networks and thus conduits of influence and relationship.

In addition, specific Focus Groups were convened to provide expert feedback as VISKA work progressed.

The National Advisory Group comprised government departments, statutory agencies, sectoral bodies and regional authorities, voluntary associations and civil society representatives. Over a three-year project, personnel and organisational structures change which impact on networks and engagement, challenging continuity.

### Educational partners

All partners to some extent would be considered 'educational' partners. Education partners in the NAG included representatives of

- Education and Training Boards active in other collaborative validation projects
- ETBI Quality Assurance Forum
- The Cork Institute of Technology (Extended Campus)

### National policy partners

National policy partners included representatives of

- The Department of Education and Skills was represented by staff from two Units, one of which worked with FET and the other of which carries overall responsibility for validation.
- The Department of Employment and Social Protection
- SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority
- The National Centre for Guidance in Education

## Representative body partners

Representative body partners included representatives of

- Education and Training Boards Ireland
- Aontas
- NALA
- Higher Education Institutions FET forum (a network of Higher Education Providers of FET Teacher Education Programmes)
- Regional Skills Forum (North West Region)
- Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI)
- Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGS)
- RPL Practitioner Network Ireland (Steering Group)
- Ballymun Jobs Centre (To raise the skills, educational levels and labour market aspirations of individuals in the greater Ballymun Area, <http://bmuniob.ie> )

## Employment partners

There were no employment partners in the National Advisory Group; at this point of development it was felt to be premature and that a service has to be in evidence prior to raising expectations.

Regional Skills Fora importantly provide for outreach and liaison with employers at regional level and for connectivity with relevant education and training opportunities and initiatives including for validation. Ballymun Jobs Centre are representative of centres and providers which liaise directly with local communities to connect people with employment opportunities. Each of the bodies represented, including the Department of Education and Skills are employers in their own rights. The TUI represent employees in parts of the education and training sector nationally. ETBs liaise extensively and on a one-to-one basis with employers in their regions in order to ascertain and meet need in a spirit of partnership.

Focus Groups were also convened largely following similar networks of expert practitioners, including on-line consultation according to relevant expertise for the topic under consideration.

## Developing and sustaining networks: challenges and barriers

Ireland has a long history of collaborative ‘partnership’ models of development in education and training; Education and Training Boards typically pool learning and resources sectorally for efficiency and other benefits. Where the establishment of the National Advisory Group encountered reticence,

it was not because of lack of interest or commitment to validation as a concept but typically because of the nature of validation itself as a cross cutting activity within organisations with which the project needed to engage. This meant that in no organisation was it any one person's sole role or responsibility, but frequently a small part of many peoples.

Equally obtaining commitment to a project group from both organisations and personnel is challenging when resources are stretched. Maintaining commitment over a three-year period given the natural ebbs and flows of organisational life, including at the level of strategic priority is challenging; some networks within organisations ceased to exist over the duration of the project, and VISKA relied instead on personnel for appropriate communications flows, including at times where strategic priority of validation ebbed or flowed.

Finally, for some associations or organisations, representatives struggled to make the biannual meetings because of workload, distance, or the challenges of being released from teaching or other duties.

There is keenness to support progress in the development and implementation of effective validation services and policy, and in the learning for policy from the VISKA project, particularly for people who have low levels of qualifications and or skills, including migrants and refugees. One Advisory Group member commented in the 2019 Survey that it is 'vital that the regional 'pilot' is attached to National agencies so that learning can be exploited', another that the work of the NAG 'informed discussion', and another that 'practitioners are interested in developing VPL in their organisations'. All Advisory Group members were experienced and senior people in their own right, active in multiple networks, bringing this insight and experience to bear both on VISKA learning and carrying VISKA learning back to their own spheres of influence.

In exploring the question of why barriers and challenges exist, the structural complexities of whether validation should be a dedicated or dispersed function within organisations and if so within which kinds of organisations, for which personnel and why, permanently or on a developmental basis arises. Some considerations may lie in the discussions around the 'professionalisation of staff' and the development of the concept of a 'validation practitioner'. Currently nationally validation, notwithstanding a long tradition in some sectors, remains an emergent practice; in funding programmes it is embedded within a range of actions, and is not an action and therefore is consequently distributed both across the funding and implementing organisations. This inclusive measure can both integrate and disown simultaneously, particularly where validation is not well established or specifically measured/prized at strategic level.

The challenge of prioritisation of benefit/return on investment in participating in a Network where resources are tight is endemic, particularly where the Viska project in Ireland was externally informed in the slipstream of fieldwork in Iceland, Flanders and Norway.

Finally the effectively political challenge for some who are representatives of associations nominated by peers but juggling with responsibilities to their employer, or who are employed on a part-time basis may find themselves unable to participate; essentially this means that certain voices may be less likely to be heard than others in typical Network structures.

Ireland conducted a limited testing under Deliverable D3.1 of the online competence self-assessment tool, so a negative impact of barriers on learners did not arise. In fact, the converse is true- the Viska National Advisory Group stimulated discussion and consideration of the provision of validation services to learners including with reference to the intervention for the client group.

However, that is not to acknowledge concerns around both practitioner and institutional identity which surfaced in early validation discussions as projects were being introduced; cultural, dispositional and institutional barriers to validation can impede progress in implementation and need to be surfaced and honestly discussed. A fear for example that opening the door to widespread validation would 'flood the service' was discussed at one Network meeting/ Focus Group relating to Viska consultation. At the heart lay concern for resourcing and infrastructure, programme coherence, but also for the identity of the professional as teacher/tutor/facilitator of learning according to a particular model, whereas validation could perceivably transform this identity to one who receives and assesses primarily. This is a profoundly different model of engagement than that of traditional teaching and learning, even though learning remains deeply at the core. Some approaches can privilege this kind of engagement more than others, and some cohorts of learners may need different approaches. Engagement with the projects on a continuum continue to provide a platform for these discussions, with increasing awareness of the benefit of the process at the heart of validation as much as the accreditation outcomes for individuals. At institutional level the question, of necessity, becomes one of incentivisation and sustainability in 'business models'- is the funding for validation comparable to sustain the practice, and in relationship terms both with individuals, communities, sectors and employers, can we demonstrate that the outcomes of validation add value? Within the various networks, fora subgroups and within the Advisory Group, Viska enabled these conversations. They did not form barriers as ETBs had committed within the Field Trial to test and within the other projects to bring their learning to bear on Viska outputs in reflection.

In managing barriers and challenges, the VISKA Secretariat maintained communications flows with the nominees, their organisations or governing or affiliated agencies where such relationships were helpful, regardless of attendance or otherwise. In some instances, for example, personnel retired, and organisations were reconfiguring responsibilities. Flexibility is essential, if time-consuming.

At structural level, the key question of locus of responsibility for validation has not been addressed and will differ according to the nature and function of the organisation. It speaks to a need for greater national co-ordination and visibility.

Some challenges were less straightforward. As noted above, and with respect for the autonomy of agencies and institutions and the span of purposes in which validation may be referenced, the question of a visible point of contact for responsibility for validation within organisations/institutions is not within the gift of QQI to resolve.

Some networks for which engagement was planned, when VISKA was conceived nationally, ceased to exist as organisations reconfigured engagement and relationship structures in response to environmental and contextual changes.

QQIs commitment in VISKA was informed by our statutory obligation to consult and therefore to a methodology which leads naturally to the formation of networks. Notwithstanding this, it was observed that 'to be effective, RPL should be led by DES as the issues cut across all areas of national education policy' (Survey of National Advisory Group members, June 2019).

### Strengths and achievements

Collaboration is a strength within and among networks.

There are two principle pertinent Networks to which VISKA has direct access, the National Advisory Group and the RPL Practitioner Network Ireland. Members of the Steering Group for the RPL Practitioner Network are represented on the NAG. Several of the agencies represented on the NAG collaborate routinely and would therefore have strong national and regional links.

The VISKA field test in Ireland was small and introduced to those implementing it remotely, with the personnel conducting the tests either contacted by telephone or liaised with by an ETB/NCGE colleague. All staff, whether guidance or front-line staff involved in testing the EU Skills Profiling Tool gave feedback on the tool via Survey Monkey. With the support of the NCGE, subsequently the four guidance practitioners involved in testing the EU Skills Profiling Tool gave feedback together and might also be considered a network of sorts. Representatives of all five centres were invited to participate in the subsequent NAG contributing their insight and reflections. In this way, additional

connections between networks were facilitated as a logical achievement derived from the inherent collaborative strength.

The most significant achievements in building and maintaining networks under VISKA are reflected in the comments of the National Advisory Group.

In June 2019 a survey of the National Advisory Group members affirmed that a network was helpful to support the further development for this learner cohort, and that it should continue to 'inform the development of consistent national practices. The 'access and communication flows' between policy, funding and practitioner level actors was deemed 'helpful', by both national organisations and practitioner based providers: 'National organisations need to be aware of projects to offer expertise and support and be responsible to engage with the learning from all such projects'.

A unique feature of the NAG was the inclusion of teacher educators in an endeavour to provide for long term preparation of preservice and in-service practitioners.

Members of the NAG commended the mix of policy and practice actors reflecting the 2012 Recommendation apart from employers, agreeing that this mix was systematically important. However, there were mixed views as to whether the establishment of a National Advisory Group was the only way to achieve similar ends. The majority felt that the National Advisory Group underlined the need at national level for a 'strategic rather than piecemeal approach with the creation of sustainable and lasting structures.' However, the caveat was also noted, that 'Practice is inadequately documented to inform infrastructural policy'. Members had considered the need for overarching national co-ordination structures 'that gave attention to specific priority groups and targeted measures, including data collection and analysis' with 'sub networks to be convened as appropriate.'

The establishment of the NAG focussed and made dissemination of learning from VISKA and other projects more effective and helped increase awareness of integration and policy gaps at national, regional and local level.

These elements are significant because there is growing awareness in the implementation of validation nationally of the person-centred nature of the service provision and therefore of the absolute necessity to have the capacity to span bridges effectively among and between sectors, learning from each other, sharing tools and practices. The VISKA NAG was a conduit for this discussion and reflection. Few absolutely new relationships were forged, most were deepened in an inclusive and focused endeavour and interdependencies were illustrated.

It was not within the scope of Viska to consider national pathways forward for validation but inevitably this shaded considerations as regional authorities responded to need.

Impacts on the learners of Viska of networks thus far are indirect.

Within the test phase, thirty-two learners completed the EU Skills Profiling Tool. This was an isolated trial, providing feedback on the digital skills audit tool in itself. For learners, it did not result in an offer of validation, nor were the providers in question requested to follow through in this way. However, the reflective nature of the trialling in collaboration with Aontas, has informed consideration of possible approaches to the identification phase of validation in community education settings, and with the NCGE, has facilitated consideration relating to development of guidance policy and guidelines for practitioners relating to role and function within validation.

NAG members indicated a vision for a future availability of validation developed through networks: 'working through the PES / Intreo- if all engagement with the labour market and job-seeking were predicated on a validation of skills and knowledge achieved this would transform and liberate citizens, release talent and heighten awareness of validation which is not an end in itself but a contribution to something more important'.

### Key findings

Networks under Viska are not precisely defined and thus can accommodate groupings as large as 80-100 (RPL Practitioner Network) or ad hoc Focus Groups of e.g. 8-10 experts, or anything in between; Viska work engaged with the full span. The key network under consideration here has been the Viska National Advisory Group (NAG). Extensive consultation was also conducted within networks on tools in development raising awareness of Viska and of validation generally.

In terms of the National Advisory Group it is clear that it was an effective and inclusive shared space between national practice and policy. Feedback from members indicates that it stimulated progress and engagement, including with each other. Key co-ordinating and supportive national agencies include ETBI, NCGE and Aontas, working with regional authorities, the ETBs and with the Community Education and adult basic education services sector and guidance practitioners. It focused on the Viska project but was additionally situated within broader European research and information, and within other national validation projects as they developed. Terms of Reference were agreed and adhered to, reflecting the role of QQI in the project.

The NAG had neither authority nor competence to resolve strategic issues pertaining to the national implementation of validation or the provision of services to the client group. The main gift of the

NAG lay in its capacity to address a specific concern, inform and be informed, and promote appropriate information flows. At strategic level, national decision making relating to prioritisation of services etc. for people with low levels of skills and or qualifications, including migrants and refugees will be made by government departments.

The RPL Practitioner Network Ireland is a large-scale network, broader in scope, but equally without authority- both networks are co-operative entities. The RPL Practitioner Network was referenced frequently in Focus Groups relating to VISKA (November 2018) as being an important focus and stimuli for the development of validation nationally.

### Key implications

Networks in Ireland tend to be engaging and stimulating and are an important element in professional practice. Access to participation in Networks can be limited according to role, sector and circumstance. The mandates of Networks vary. Success for any endeavour is predicated on alignment with government policy, funding strategies, and 'will' at the relevant decision-making levels.

#### Implications for future validation development in a VISKA like programme or process

Lessons from VISKA Ireland are cautious, given its small scale, but with regard to networks, participants were experts who gave generously of their time and expertise. In considering feedback therefore, some key messages for future development might include for example that when developing networks for a VISKA like programme the capacity to be flexible is important within a programme of work. Having a requirement such as e.g. six meetings over a three-year period is less helpful than having outcomes that must be met, including as supported by appropriate meetings as necessary. Similarly, concepts such as overarching Reference Groups are helpful and more likely to gain loyalty rather than one single Network type to cover all requirements.

Political and strategic commitment at organisational level is particularly helpful if the endeavour is lengthy as is governmental mandate / political alignment; for example, the programme of work associated with the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation is led by the Department of Education and Skills and embedded within actions of a range of strategic initiatives by various actors. Similarly, over time organisations and personnel change, and strategic commitment is helpful in maintaining and protecting the stability of outcomes. It is equally a reality that staff will include part time and flexible workers, who may require particular facilities to engage effectively, and to protect sustainable corporate learning.

## Policy implications

The core assumption that making the skills of adults visible in the form of qualifications diminishes skills mismatch or underemployment remains. The evidence of both skills mismatch and underemployment is clear. It is not clear that documenting/making skills visible will necessarily improve skills utilisation in employment or increase opportunities for people. There may be many factors impacting underutilisation and underemployment, and skills mismatch. The VSKA trial nationally is insufficient to indicate whether skills identification will support utilisation of skills or appropriate employment; however, aligning with other project findings through the work of VSKA networks including consultative networks, suggest that the process of identification is valuable and increases motivation for further engagement, supporting the utilisation of skills including in employment. Caution is helpful.

NAG members commented that the process of validation itself was more important than the outcomes in some ways.

While VSKA partners believed from the outset that making our skills and capacities visible including through validation processes would benefit individuals, societies and labour markets, assisting in ensuring continued economic competitiveness, and also believed that this was particularly important as a protection for people with low levels of qualifications and or skills, providing a causal evidence base over three years is challenging. Nationally the range of policies in which validation is named is well understood. None the less, implementation of validation remains patchy and national co-ordination and data collection is poor.

Networks- Communities of Practice- are an important element in supporting sustainable practice. Network members want policy that is connected to, informing and informed by national policy and strategy. This suggests three levels of operation- Community of Practice/service, Community at Policy/Strategy and Community at interfaces- not all of which would or should operate at the same speed, or with the same personnel.

### *Implications of policy*

There are no existing national, regional or local policies which have a negative influence or impact on the issues discussed in this chapter relating to VSKA of which QQI is aware.

### *Implications for policy*

Nationally in relation to the VSKA project learning and this cohort, people with low levels of skills and or qualifications, including migrants and refugees, an overt statement summarising existing validation policies and actors across the range of government departments could be published. An

overarching appropriate working group/network could be established to consider development of the next layer of policy requirements, including e.g. definitions, prioritisation, arrangements for data collection and for the pragmatic integration of the range of policy statements into the lived reality of our education and training, employment and social initiatives.

In the short to medium term, build on the effective, data informed work of the Upskilling Pathways Steering Group as the core Network of the DES concerning this cohort of learners. This could include for example,

- Development of a validation action plan that supports Upskilling Pathways including for this cohort focused on person centred validation implementation
- Linking the strategic programme of work to identified prioritised characteristics of individuals for validation services through appropriate networks e.g. ETB, Community and DEASP services, with appropriate adult guidance services
- At strategic level within key agencies and organisations naming a point of contact for validation queries inclusively (from which they may be redirected as appropriate)
- Supporting the ETBI evaluation of existing practices in validation across the ETB FET sector, including measuring benefits of investment in validation, and informing the development of
  - a long-term mechanism for connecting validation services to target groups and the continued linkage with impact of services provided and
  - appropriate infrastructure at regional level for validation enquirers within and without programmes of education and training
- Establishing relevant communities of practice to support the exploitation of existing, testing of emergent and development of appropriate holistic toolkits to meet appropriate need, and to support practitioner engagement
- ETC.

At European level, the Commission in line with Recommendations, support peer learning and exchanges of experience and good practice, providing inventories and thematic synthesis reports, and providing the European Guidelines for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Additionally, the VPL Biennale and the bi-annual Festival for Validation hosted by the Commission support networks of practitioners at European level.

There has been consistent interest among European colleagues in the RPL Practitioner Network Ireland, and there appears to be a growing trend in terms of the establishment of networks for practitioners in other Member States. Queries around the funding of the Network indicate that this

is of concern; funding impacts nationally in terms of approaches to work undertaken and possibilities for the Network.

Participation in pan European events can be difficult to access for some, for reasons of release, selection and finance. While communications are always strong from the Commission, is there a way of connecting further national networks with European events so that those who do not travel, have attractive options for remote engagement?

Can the integration of validation in skills strategies linked to lifelong learning and the breadth of mobility objectives be made more visible in terms of value to the ordinary citizen from the perspective of networks that citizens use? The work of Aontas and the EAEAL including through the 'One Step Up' initiative supports this. It is possible in a modest way that the case studies from learners emerging in the VISKA project in other partner countries may contribute to greater visibility of opportunities for validation in skills strategies.

## Extending and adapting tools used in the validation of prior learning for people who may be low skilled, migrants, refugees:

This chapter discusses the tools which validation personnel in the VISKA trials in **Ireland** use in their Viska validation programme, offering analysis on the strengths and weaknesses of these tools in terms of impact and quality, as well as the challenges associated with tool development and adaptation.

The types of tools that can be used to support staff and learners in validation is broad and can include:

- Paper based templates and resources with more up to date online solutions
- Tools to identify basic skills levels and competences
- Tools that support the process of the validation of prior learning
- Tools for self-evaluation and gap identification.
- Tools to assist those involved in the validation process including reflection
- Registration and monitoring systems which assist in tracking the development of the individual as they engage in validation.
- Tools that assist in structuring the validation mentoring session.

In Ireland, a range of reflection, gap identification and assessment tools are in place and used for this client group across different sectors. Many of these were discussed and or shared with the NAG as part of the VISKA project, for example InForm (Ballymun Jobs), WriteOn (NALA), CITO, (NALA), and the suite of tools that continued to develop and adapt across the ETB sector as part of the TOBAR project concurrent with VISKA.

The grant application referring to Tools Development and or adaptation of tools used in validation or NFIL includes tasks relating to digitised approaches to validation services to improve service provision and outcomes, consensus on what transversal skills encompass through the development of criteria and with a focus on skills audits, the development of competences for frontline and guidance staff and the provision of training modules to assist in meeting the needs of this specific group, and the development of improved quality assurance measures for validation. VISKA therefore surfaced greater awareness of the range of tools in place nationally among the NAG.

### Context and aims

Over time because of varying complexities the VISKA proposal for the testing of digital tools (Deliverable 3.1, see <https://viskaproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Online-competence-self->

[assessment-tool-1.pdf](#) ) reconfigured and became a testing in some jurisdictions, including as an exceptional means, in Ireland, of the EU Skills Profiling Tool as a specific digital assessment tool, with a small cohort of migrants and refugees.

The development and adaptation of the EU Skills Profiling Tool was beyond the scope of the VISKA project. None-the-less, it is understood that feedback from the VISKA trials contributed to further iterations and improvements of the tool.

However, it may be helpful to note that in parallel with VISKA a range of other national projects emerged, including TOBAR and latterly, CITO <sup>9</sup>TOBAR makes available a range of tools which continue to evolve and adapt based on feedback from practitioners and is used to support validation processes at levels 2-6 of the NFQ. It is shared across the ETB sector and is used in a quasi-national project. CITO aims to identify and test a scalable approach to providing skills assessment for adults with low skills. It will test and prototype an accessible learner-facing skills checker tool to help adults self-assess their basic skills and orientate them towards appropriate training opportunities. CITO is a KA3 Erasmus+ policy experimentation project funded by the European Commission. Initiatives such as these formed a helpful context for consideration of the range of VISKA tools and concepts as practitioners who wrestled with similar challenges and principles, became active contributors in VISKA focus group work.

### Validation tools for (low skilled, migrants or refugees)

#### Tool selection, development and use

The decision to test the EU Skills Profiling Tool was taken following the Consortia meeting in April 2018 as it was internationally available and comparable. However, only two partners were eligible to trial this, Iceland and Ireland. Accordingly, Ireland agreed to trial, initially to have results returned to Iceland and subsequently to be analysed nationally. In Iceland, the trial would be conducted by Guidance Practitioners. QQI agreed to seek guidance and front-line staff to conduct a small-scale trial through existing networks of providers and with the kind support of the NCGE and Aontas. This ensured optimisation of impact and dissemination at national level.

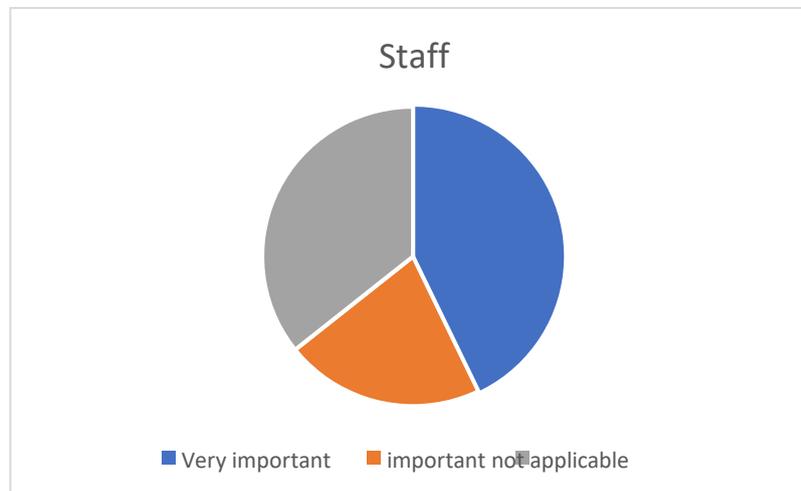
#### Tool development and rationale

The EU Skills Profiling Tool was devised as an open resource that can be used independently or with support of front-line or guidance staff. It is specifically designed for third country nationals to facilitate documentation of skills and next steps in planning including for validation. The tool is available in 30 languages and is free to trial, with the exception of staff costs.

#### Experience and Use of the EU Skills Profiling Tool

The EU Skills Profiling Tool was tested with thirty-two learners in Ireland with support of four

guidance practitioners in ETBs and one community education provider, with a total of ten staff providing feedback on their experience of using the tool. There were mixed views among staff on the importance of having a tool, with some feeling that it was very important and others feeling that it was not applicable.



D5.2 FIGURE 25 VIEWS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF A TOOL TO SUPPORT VALIDATION (IRISH STAFF)

Anecdotal feedback from learners included that the question sets were too long, some were repetitive or inappropriate, but: 'Clients felt it would be good if you could log in again at a later meeting and revisit or that they could use it at home as it had a translation screen however at the end you could save to your local PC and print off but not edit at a later date.'

In gathering feedback from learners, fifteen out of twenty-one responding to the question in the survey commented that their experience of the tool was either good or very good with one remarking that it was excellent. Only one did it alone and unsupported. One found that it did not allow sufficiently for educational planning of next steps, nor did it capture all learning- indeed the majority found that it did this to 'some extent' suggesting some disappointment or potential challenge for practitioners in managing expectations in using the tool.

The researchers have asked that if different tools were used for different scenarios then these should be clearly detailed.

As this was the only tool for which research has been conducted under VISKA in Ireland, it is not possible to empirically compare alternate approaches or tools for similar purposes. However, one of the research participants, a Guidance Practitioner gave the following anecdotal feedback from her clients: 'Overall they felt that for guidance there were too many sections that were not relevant and that we get to the answer quicker with a guidance discussion.'

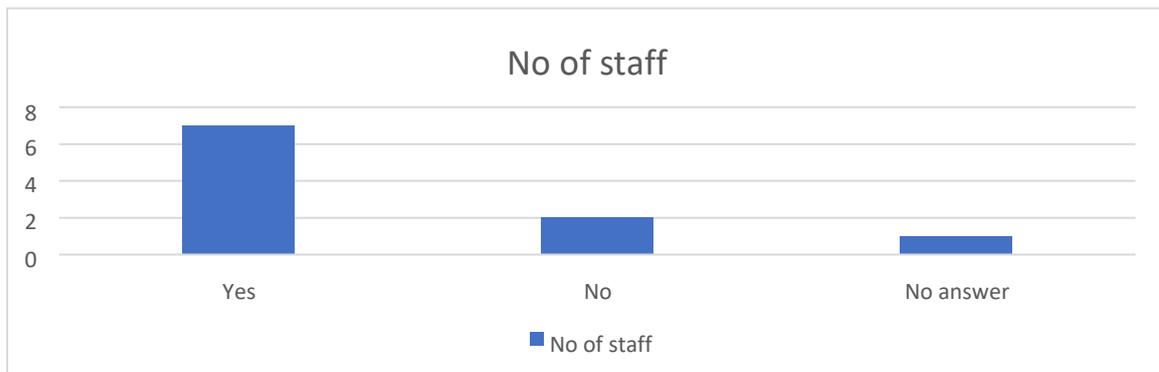
## Strengths and achievements

### Tool strengths and positives and the overall toolkit for validation

The tool is open resource accessible and available in multiple languages. Anecdotal observations included that:

- ‘the work-oriented part was helpful if the client could identify with it, e.g. in terms of previous occupational title’.
- ‘It would be useful for someone who had been in the Ireland/EU for a period of time as they were more familiar with our education frameworks’

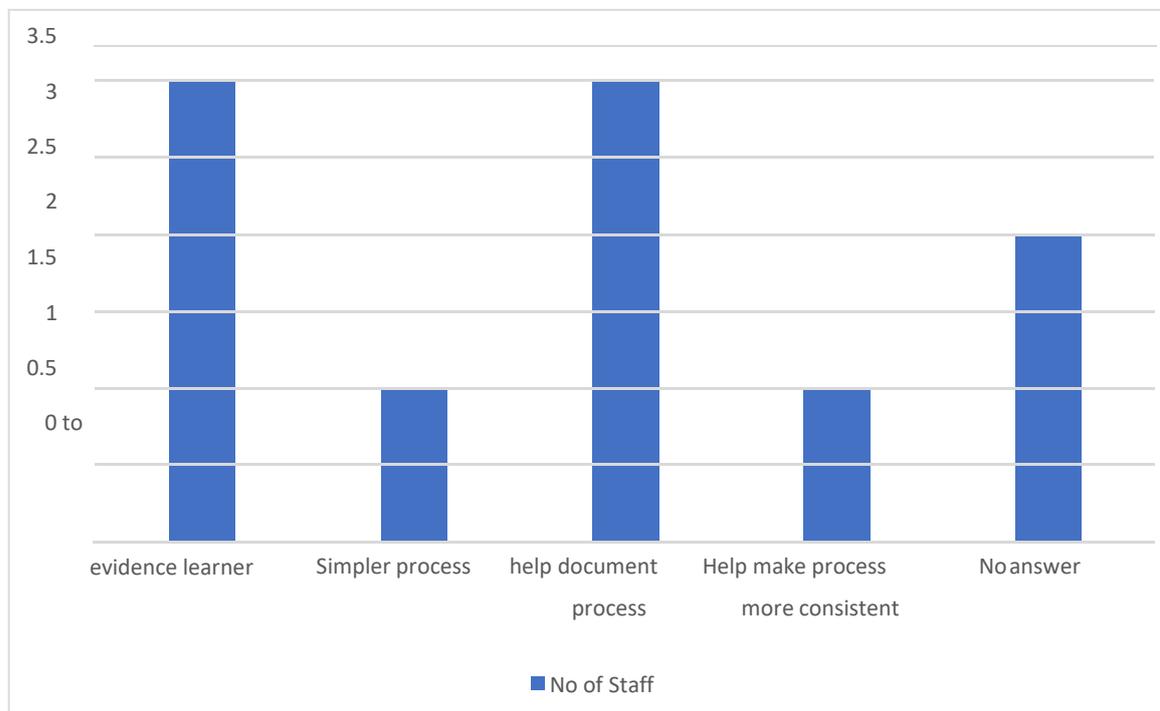
The majority of staff who worked with the EU Skills Profiling tool felt that it supported learners in using skills assessment tools for validation under the VISKA project. There was a small minority who did not support or who didn’t answer the question.



D5.2 FIGURE 27 VIEWS ON WHETHER THE TOOL SUPPORTED THE LEARNER IN THE VALIDATION PROCESS (IRISH STAFF)

The most significant achievements regarding the tools, the achievements or success factors are set out below according to the survey responses:

In determining how these tools help the learner in the validation process the following chart depicts the answers given within the survey. As is evident, evidencing learning and helping to document the process were the two factors which were identified as being the most helpful.



A majority of staff would also welcome a broader introduction of the validation tool for broader use within validation.

In supporting a broader introduction of the tool, the reasons given included that it

- was important to highlight that all skills are valid as there is a tendency to place less importance on skills acquired through unpaid/ voluntary work.
- is very suitable for low level skills
- gives a broader introduction to skills, transferable skills and what employers look for.

However, it was also felt that the tool was very long with some translational inaccuracies in places. These were felt to be important because consistency, equity and accessibility matter in any sustainable service. It was clear from both learner and staff feedback that the process needed to be efficient also. The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) are the single biggest provider of online certification at basic skills levels, some of which is achieved using a skills challenge model of validation, where an applicant continuously tests themselves against assessments to the point of achievement of an award or partial award on the National Framework of Qualifications. In some instances, this quality assured programme is delivered also by ETBs. It is an efficient digital model of validation for targeted awards. Write-on is not a guidance tool and presupposes a decision in relation to a broad set of learning outcomes that may or may not be validated or addressed through continued engagement with learning.

## Challenges and barriers

Challenges in using the EU Skills Profiling Tool included that it was long and could be time consuming and tiring for clients to complete. Some questions were deemed inappropriate.

In discussion at the NAG meeting of July 2019, guidance practitioners commented that the tool was a catalyst for discussion with clients but that there were also some less helpful features.

Some feedback suggested that an interview with a skilled guidance practitioner would be more efficient for clients. A significant drawback for this tool was the duration that it took to complete, up to one and a half hours, thus making it resource intensive. It did not necessarily eliminate the need for translators to assist in dialogue, despite extensive availability of languages for the online product. Management of client expectation was a feature of commentary as feedback included that the tool captured learning to 'some extent'.

Discussion on the feedback from the survey was extensive. Guidance practitioners underlined the need for quality, respect, motivation and trust to be built in and form part of both the process and use of the tool, and the challenges of engaging with a tool potentially in a somewhat de-contextualised manner. It was felt that the purpose of the process must be explained and understood before undertaking the use of the skills profiling tool- while several practitioners actively selected the people they would work with because of their level of experience and language skills, it still proved difficult and tiring to use. The tool was 'long' and seemed to lack a positive perspective.

Discussion included

- consideration of bias and power within test design and the challenges of interpreting bias across cultures. The question of how bias and intercultural engagement in digital form impacts was of interest.
- Language was an issue in implementing trials- translators didn't always show up, and some people felt that the translation side by side on the questions was not accurate within the tool.
- The issues of cultural engagement, male and female, male to female, and of entitlements and expectations across and among different cultures was of interest. Would some questions be inappropriate in one jurisdiction and appropriate in another? Should questions be bespoke or more generalised? It was queried as to whether it was culturally normed, or if it could be, how big a piece of work that might be, and ultimately what its purpose was...
- Some felt that there were more efficient ways to get to the same ends
- The tool was felt to be long, and it was difficult to take breaks, to log out and back in again.
- The occupational/work piece was felt to be the most successful element.
- In using any tool there is a training implication for staff, and a contextualisation piece. This

would need consideration, including to clarify the expectations for interviewer and interviewee.

- Those clients who participated had not necessarily received a personal progression plan which therefore did not add value to the process- and those testing were not asked to provide that service as part of the trial.

A view was expressed that an engagement with RPL processes (which this testing did not necessarily have) had value added where those who engaged had an opportunity to develop a personal progression plan which added value to the process.

The research partners have asked how did all these challenges impact the work of the mentors/ guidance/ front line staff who were working with the tools?

As can clearly be seen from the notes of the NAG meeting above, front line staff and guidance counsellors engaged significantly with the challenges and opportunities presented by the tools and the client groups whom they routinely serve. Cultural sensitivity and management is something that surfaced strongly in line with themes in the CPD module also proposed by VISKA. Equally some of the challenges of working with translators was common to that experienced by colleagues in other partner countries.

The research partners have asked how challenges impacted if at all on the learners? Did they have any reflections on the tools which they were presented with? If addressed were solutions successful?

Client feedback formally collected was limited to the Survey Monkey data which did not elicit qualitative feedback.

The trial was a short-term initiative, specifically undertaken to support VISKA outcomes. However, the NCGE and Aontas as lead national organisations have undertaken subsequent dialogue with practitioners under their aegis to explore issues and approaches within the respective roles.

Finally, the research questioned whether in relation to tools what challenges were impossible to overcome? Front-line and guidance staff working with clients testing the tool did so trusting the level of development and expertise that informed its development and adoption.

## Key findings

Networks discussed all tools developed within VISKA in depth and provided feedback to the project. There is evidence to suggest that this consultative process informed by learning from other partners experiences, informed regional policy development and practice. For example, all sixteen ETBs published quality assurance policies relating to validation over the period of VISKA, with eleven actively participating in validation projects, and all sixteen indicating in funding performance

compacts that they were giving strong consideration to development in this area over the next funding period.

### Key implications

Currently locally and regionally, digital and paper-based tools are used to identify skills, knowledge and competence and to assist in informing clients of opportunities that may be of interest or relevance, including leading to validation. Guidance services have a special remit in this regard. Nationally there is no single preferred tool or consistent approach including across public employment services oriented towards identification of accomplishment.

From the small-scale survey of learners returning online survey results, the opportunity to identify skills, knowledge and competence comprehensively was viewed positively and the survey of users of the tools evidenced a desire for further planning and engagement with digital tools.

### Implications for future validation development

There appear to be two traditions for the development of tools meeting the ‘identification’ phase element of validation, whether face to face or on-line: to align with programmes and awards from the outset assisting the client in this direction, or to approach in a more exploratory way enabling a range of purposes and ultimate destinations. The Public Employment Service is trialling some innovations in the latter direction in specific regions. Consistent national approaches to meeting the needs of specific cohorts including with toolkits are helpful; where this is the case, practitioners can build around a general practice. Digital capacity is also helpful.

Providers of education and training are conscious of making provision ‘validation-friendly’. Consequently, tools will be developed in harness with programme development which supports validation engagement. However, engagement presupposes determination of a direction of travel. Digital liaison between that initial phase and the latter in terms of tools is a logical connection, but is not yet a realistic point of development.

In monitoring the implementation of quality assurance measures, the VISKA toolkit is comprehensive and echoes the EU Guidelines for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. It could be tailored to specific local, regional or national need, adapted or built upon.

### Policy Implications

The Department of Education and Skills contracted a review of Guidance from which stakeholders called for the development of a national policy on Guidance. Such policy might consider the range of tools and strategies for identification of skills, knowledge and competence, including digitally, from both public employment services and adult guidance traditions, that might ultimately connect with validation services.

Those engaged in programme development and support materials, including open source, online and face to face, give attention to access through validation. Access includes access for the purposes of participation with acknowledgement of learning achieved, access to a programme with exemptions or with partial awards, on the basis of learning achieved, and access to awards on the basis of learning achieved.

However, the capacity at sectoral level to engage also with identification tool outputs used in exploratory validation dialogue may not easily be resolved. It is an expression of the challenge of the individual citizen engaging with the systems and infrastructure of organisations and vice versa.

#### *Implications of policy*

Validation practices nationally are still emergent and are largely unevaluated and undocumented within FET. Perceived fears around the cost of validation persist notwithstanding significant progress nationally in implementation. Without evidence it is challenging to make a case for further investment, including for tool development.

#### *Implications for policy*

Suggestions in relation to tool development and availability include that at national level, for digital tools that support gathering more extensive and accessible information about the competences an individual possesses to facilitate progression planning

- the guidance services are best positioned to lead the identification of the policy implications of the development of digital tools that facilitate personal as opposed to general progression planning, while education and training providers are best positioned to make recommendations about tools that support validation against programmes and awards. It will be necessary at policy level to facilitate and fund connecting these two, respecting the competences of each.
- The development of digital tools should include consideration of provision for data connectivity between one element and the next, for clients who progress to validation and or engagement in programmes of education or training.
- It is possible that a totally interoperable digital tool is within vision but not grasp as elements are still in development such as the Irish Register of Qualifications ( <https://irq.ie/> ) which supports visibility of qualifications, learning outcomes of programmes and awards.

#### *At European level*

- A strength of the EU Skills Profiling Tool lay in the occupational fields possibly because at pan European level there may be greater consistency in occupational profiles than in education and training approaches. Could this strength be built upon further to support validation by

profiling possible evidence associated with differing profiles, digital skills challenges for elements of commonly profiled occupations?

- Country, synthesis and thematic reports are important contributions in monitoring the implementation of VNFIL across Europe. The support of peer learning activities and thematic seminars is also helpful, as are events such as the Biennale and the Validation Festival. These can usefully address specific aspects of validation and the challenge of dissemination and extending impact nationally is sometimes difficult. Could we consider e.g. a validation bulletin to support this activity specifically?

## Transversal Skills

This chapter provides analysis of the transversal skill activities under VISKA in Ireland, including a description of the challenges involved and analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of developing a framework.

### Context and aims

The Literature Review and Country needs analysis (D2.2) at the outset noted that in Ireland, the approach to transversal skills has been operating to the EU definitions and reflected within ‘common awards’ as both individual learning outcomes and as learning outcomes clustered as minor awards on the National Framework of Qualifications. EU definitions and consultations have been helpful in defining transversal skills at local, regional and national levels as embedded within award standards. Local adaptation and interpretation by providers and programme designers according to curriculum needs continues. Transversal skills are valued through direct assessment and may be achieved in a diversity of contexts; employers value transversal or ‘soft’ skills highly. An identified challenge included the capacity of validation applicants to articulate their own transversal skills confidently in the context of career and progression planning.

### Transversal Skills overview

VISKA Ireland consulted widely through the conducting of a focus group/workshop in November 2018 gathering feedback on the published criteria for assessment of transversal skills (D3.2) from experts in two separate ‘network’ discussions while other partners were preparing for and conducting tests through field trials.

Feedback was framed mainly from the perspective of QQI as an awarding body, with an acknowledgment of how cultural norms across partner countries determined what and how achievement is prized within Qualifications Frameworks. Concerns at these early stages of discussion would have included acknowledgement that within a tradition of ‘standards’ the project should describe what is possible to assess formally, with a reference against a standard at a particular level and award type of the NFQ, in summative assessment. Across other partners plans, the kinds of assessment did not necessarily appear to require Framework standards or awards and appeared

very open to formative assessment and dialogue. Sectoral standards, job-related, or curricula related standards co-exist with NFQ relationships differently. From an Irish perspective, this would limit but not exclude value for learners. The value would largely lie in the guidance dialogue and in process, rather than currently in certification outcomes. The question would have been whether assessment standards in validation always related to Framework standards, and the variations that these may take across European partners, beyond the life of the project, may mean that beyond e.g. the level of principles, for example, consensus may not be entirely possible. The identification of skills and criteria may have most value as a framework for conversation within a validation process rather than as a support for validation leading to NFQ related certification.

A second concern identified in this early feedback lay with experience of the challenges of for example, use and interpretation of standards, and where words like 'basic' become more marked when learners themselves engage in self-assessment. Cues and clues as to level can be very important in such contexts. There was also some concern around assumptions of stability in profile and opportunity for the target group, where in the Irish experience of working with people who experienced marginalisation and who have low levels of skill and or qualification, often life stability is not a feature, but in fact is a challenge.

The strength of personally oriented formative assessment was clear from a process perspective in initial thinking particularly in the guidance rich identification phase context from which the VISKA work sprang. The process example with the 'spider graph' was of interest in illustrating a personalised value for personal planning and development in terms of competences.

At the November 2018 workshop the national context for transversal skills was outlined within the network, including where validation currently sits in the context of national and international policy with reference to QQI awards policy, and the implicit opportunities and implications for the formal identification and certification of skills. Transversal skills were deemed by participants to be very relevant, with dual benefits in terms of both the recognition of skills and more broadly in terms of personal development. It was reported that the tentative outcomes of the field trials at that point suggested that the process of supported reflection and the enhancement of the description of skills increased broader motivation and confidence among trial participants.

Similar outcomes were observed in an Irish context where workshop participants cited examples of individuals who had undergone the VPL process and as a result were able to identify and articulate their transversal skills effectively to secure employment, far beyond initial aspirations. It was considered that that the ability to make transversal skills visible and build confidence in this regard could have a relevance to outcomes in the labour market. Caution was also advocated regarding

pursuing solely employer-led outcomes. A continuing need for emphasis on the individuals own core abilities to lead processes was also articulated in validation processes.

It was considered that the process of eliciting information on transversal skills was an important part of the guidance/mentoring function and there may be a need for further exploration of this from a policy context.

Ultimately there was support for transversal skills being identified both explicitly in awards, embedded within programmes as is current practice, but in a validation context, being particularly emphasised in the identification and documentation stages strengthening the individual's capacity to both articulate and reflect on their own strengths. The role of both guidance counsellors and mentors in facilitating these conversations was acknowledged as important for the individual at the heart of the process.

### Key findings

Key findings for transversal skills arising solely from VISKA, include that

- such skills are highly valued in all contexts and that practices for appropriate recognition in the National Framework is evolving, notwithstanding current strong attainment by learners.
- VISKA transversal skills sources in HR practices rather than academic frameworks reflect more typical life experience for people seeking validation. This also reflects the increasing direction of dialogue nationally for validation and other policy areas, working directly with people who are in employment.
- transversal skills exploration is an important part of the validation process regardless of the potential for formal, summative recognition in the form of awards on the National Framework
- the exploration of transversal skills in validation may be carried out with different perspectives and for different purposes by guidance practitioners and mentors in a validation process
- a question arose within the NAG (November 2018) as to whether transversal skills identified in this way and according to this model could be graded in summative assessment, and if so, how?

- the agreed transversal skills areas are broadly reflected in many minor awards (CAS) in QQI current awards systems and associated processes and are being achieved within major awards, including through validation.
- The Viska project document allows for additional identified learning areas in the broad fields, progression and associated criteria according to diverse national and contextual needs. It is therefore flexible and extensible.
- The Viska document allows through the process description as applied in Iceland, in addition, for personalised planning and an overview on a personal basis of skills, informing planning and development. The work was viewed as rich.

### Key implications

Key policy impacts are grouped under the headings:

- Consensus regarding the value to the individual in the validation process in both guidance and pedagogical contexts, underpinning a policy implication for availability of training for staff in facilitating such discussion and evidence gathering, and provision of time for this work
- Requirement for situated evaluation regarding benefit of assessment of transversal skills, whether formative or summative

The project consultation through networks including the NAG, Aontas research from Learners Fora and the recent QQI comprehensive consultation on assessment identifies a common thread that strongly suggests that overt and explicit dialogue with learners/validation claimants about transversal skills is important, has valuable outcomes for the individual and for the development of validation systems itself.

The process of identification of personal capacity in transversal skills, whether those identified in Viska as essential informed by an HR/occupational perspective, or by EU Key Competences or other contexts, is essential to personal planning. This can be supported albeit differently by both mentors in a validation process and by career guidance counsellors in a career planning and progression management process, including with reference to validation, as well as in pedagogical contexts. The dialogue process appears to be an important part of realisation

There appears to be an element of similar discovery in this process that policy must acknowledge.

A direct implication for staff is that this needs to be provided for in time and resourced within provision for validation and practice generally. Skills to lead such engagement varies and may need investment.

Current evidence of impact of the value of this process nationally is small. A policy decision would be needed in order to support ongoing documentation and evaluation for those who participate in validation in order to gather qualitative evidence of the benefit of this process, for whom in which contexts, and to what end, nationally.

#### Implications for future development in the recognition and validation of transversal skills

If policy makers and practitioners are to support overt and explicit dialogue about transversal skills in a range of fields, this means that ways must be found to allow training and support for stakeholders to enable active reflection on transversal skills with learners/claimants in different parts of 'the system', including in HR, workplace, pedagogical and guidance cultural contexts.

There must be clarity in relation to the relevant transversal skills prized and that are possible to validate within the Framework.

#### Policy implications

Key messages for hypothetical policy makers about the validation of transversal skills might include that where occupational standards are being described, specific attention to describing learning outcomes for associated transversal skills would assist in validation practices.

Continuous professional development for validation practitioners and those involved in pedagogy will take account of the need to enable discussion and exploration of transversal skills associated with particular fields of learning.

Reflection on transversal skills is a critical part and outcome of validation processes even where this does not result in summative assessment. Policy measures should not evaluate the merit of validation purely on certification outputs.

#### *Implications of policy*

In Ireland transversal skills have traditionally been overtly valued in awards systems as a matter of policy. Different questions are now being asked of awards systems by some stakeholders in relation to the recognition of transversal skills.

Implications of existing national policy from the chapter for the validation of transversal skills therefore include

- the need for a tolerance for careful experimentation and learning within the ecosystem from all stakeholders as new approaches are explored and implemented.
- that while for example the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy is being successfully implemented

across FET provision, including with innovative practices, if validation of transversal skills and the overt discussion of transversal skills is to be encouraged, supported and prized, then some of the practices associated with the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy implementation need to extend across all disciplines with reference to the appropriate transversal skills. CPD policy additionally needs to support the development of skills to facilitate such discussion.

- A National Guidance Policy if recommended for development arising from the Department of Education and Skills Review of Guidance might take account also of the implications of this aspect of guidance counselling interface with clients.

### *Implications for policy*

VISKA seeks to establish what might need to happen in a policy context for the validation of transversal skills, and to raise awareness of their importance in policy terms. This is considered below.

Implications for policy at broad and general level include the continued consideration of occupational standards, connectivity for example with ESCO, with skills strategies and requirements and future skills needs. From the national perspective, alignment with European thinking on core competences is essential. It would also be important to continue to align thinking with planning for CPD, and to 'close loops' with resourcing and planning at provider levels.

Finally, it would be critical to acknowledge that driving forward more overt consideration of transversal skills is an ambition that is bigger than the capacity of the validation community to deliver. It goes to the heart of what it is to be successful in our endeavours in any sphere and is perhaps an overarching societal concern. As VISKA surfaces these important questions, it is equally vital to close the chapter remembering the reflection at the Advisory Group of the importance to the individual of the process of identification and the value added in being able to articulate and 'own' personal attributes and skills from a reflective perspective that validation when well done brings; transversal skills can be strong even where academic performance is, or appears to be lacking. Where we have a chance to acknowledge strength and success, to increase motivation for further engagement, there is an imperative to provide and support that chance.

## Capacity building for Guidance and other front-line staff

This chapter focuses on guidance counsellors and other front-line staff, providing an overview of their activities and the roles they assume under the validation of prior learning.

### The role of the guidance and other front-line staff

#### Background

Currently roles nationally in relation to validation are not defined nor associated with any particular profile of staff. Staff involved in the testing of the EU Skills Profiling Tool were all employees of an ETB as part of a guidance service or in a Community Education setting, as an experienced Community Education Practitioner.

Guidance professionals in the execution of their obligations to clients will provide information and guidance about validation and direct people towards validation services as appropriate. Guidance Co-ordinators provide outreach services to adult education services, supervise guidance information services and staff, and develop appropriate local networks and partnerships. Guidance staff are highly trained, skilled professionals typically qualified at Level 9 on the National Framework of Qualifications ([www.ncge.ie](http://www.ncge.ie)).

#### Guidance activities

Activities of front-line staff engaged in validation would vary according to level of responsibility and role, as suggested above. 'Front line' staff could involve

- management level staff which might liaise in an overarching way to ensure a smooth two-way engagement where 'cohort-based' or 'collective' engagement is envisaged. This would involve liaison e.g. with employers and individuals to explore mechanisms that will work to deliver the service. It may additionally involve specific analysis and matching of learning outcomes with awards and programmes, in order to provide for appropriate matching of staff to cohort etc.
- front line and guidance staff responsibilities might include meeting, conducting initial interviews and facilitating engagement, connecting with subject-matter experts, and mentoring activities with learners. Guidance Counsellors may engage both with groups and individuals to introduce services, provide impartial career and information and to facilitate individuals making informed educational, career and life choices.

#### Defining competence

As part of the overarching consultation during the development of the tool, 'Training Module and Training for Frontline Staff' (D3.3), QQI sought feedback from expert practitioners and through a Network /Focus Group while trials were being conducted in other partner countries, on the proposed tool 'Training Module for Front-line Professionals in the VISKA project' (D3.3); this was discussed by the National Advisory Group and elements of which were also reflected on in later meetings. VISKA

Ireland did not offer a training module.

## Aims

Feedback on the VISKA module 'Training Module and Training for Frontline Staff' (D3.3) at developmental stage was sought electronically and by telephone from the NAG, from expert and experienced providers of initial teacher education for VET and additionally from members of the RPL Practitioner Network. This was collated and submitted to the project lead in a single tracked changes document.

Core elements of feedback included observations relating to the philosophical positioning and conceptualisation of VPL underpinning the document, consideration of both global and European contexts and the relationship to the EU Guidelines, and that a deep understanding of the nature of assessment was required in which VPL practice should be located. Much of the feedback treated the then proposed course structure and individual learning outcomes.

Collated responses raised the following observations:

- A welcome for discussion of the topic, for the value of the discussion in itself
- Welcome for the findings ultimately from the project with regard to the training module specifically, and to locating those in the Irish context and enhancing responses to the various FET strategies nationally.
- Some concerns regarding definitions and clarity of roles of those involved at different stages- who is meant to participate, what is 'front line' in the different jurisdictions? Others immediately understood the term to refer to teachers, tutors, trainers, guidance counsellors and those involved in the 'front-line' of meeting with learners seeking/enquiring/engaging with validation services
- There was acknowledgement of the different target groups within VISKA, both clients who may have had experience of disadvantage/negative experiences of education/training, and those who had experience of trauma associated with becoming a refugee or indeed with some experiences of migration
- It was felt that the essence of the programme would be very valuable for trainers, teachers, and front-line staff who may not feel themselves to be adequately skilled to engage with traumatized people; guidance counsellors would have specific training that would provide for such engagement however
- The idea of training in intercultural sensitivity and in the use of an interpreter in an RPL context also drew some queries/requests for clarification and was of interest
- Concerns around assessment generally and assessment in validation practices drew many

comments. This derived from reflection on the training module itself and from the experience of leading a team of practitioners within a service in implementing VPL project successfully from a green-field situation, with additional supports. Notwithstanding that the training module is largely designed for people who have had some training in VPL previously, the insights raised are summarised here because VPL can be a disruptor to traditional approaches to assessment. These included the observation that low prior levels of qualifications do not support an assumption of that a portfolio of work will also result in a low VPL qualification outcome, nor that a low level of prior qualification equates to a low level of skill. VPL needs to assess prior formal, non-formal and informal assessment in an integrated concurrent way as skill levels build over time particularly if enhanced in day to day practice. Assessment must relate to evidence; VPL applicants need a clear understanding of what is defined as evidence and what can support an application or not, and how evidence may be weighted for grading purposes. It may raise the question as to whether the area of assessment needs strengthening within the training module (or whether it is a separate matter entirely.)

- The emphasis on a general module descriptor for any country to adjust to the local situation and circumstance is felt to be useful in principle; however, there were considerable diversities in views as to appropriate duration, specific content and modes of delivery, assessment and accreditation options.

When the Training Module (D3.3) had been agreed and field trials were in action, a Network Focus Group was hosted in November 2018 and consideration was given to the module by national experts including from government departments, policy and funding bodies. This group identified three main kinds of CPD needs in Ireland:

- Awareness raising CPD, aimed at a broad, generalist audience to provide a strong foundation for validation by culturally assimilating the rationale and practice. It was envisaged that this type of CPD could be relatively short in duration.
- Practical CPD aimed at those undertaking the conduct of validation assessments. This would clearly outline how the validation process should be undertaken and expected standards
- Specialist CPD, building on existing CPD, with additional training on meeting additional support needs such as for participants from migrant backgrounds or with learning difficulties or other special circumstances

It was considered that the module (D3.3) served a role in respect of this first group, i.e. raising awareness of validation but that it did not necessarily equip staff to undertake assessments.

It was agreed that the availability of CPD was a high priority and needed to be practice oriented,

organic and live, utilising an appropriate balance of technology and face to face delivery. Language should be clear and accessible.

In a national context, it was considered that it would be useful to establish national and sectoral standards and underpinning principles to guide practice. It was noted that there are several national bodies with varying degrees of responsibility across the different education and training sectors in Ireland including the DES, HEA, SOLAS and QQI and that engagement is required among and between those driving and delivering validation nationally. It was suggested that greater visibility on CPD needs and the extent to which they have been met could be illustrated with improved data collection.

The module and discussion of it was considered timely for Ireland. Workshop participants felt that this was important to build on good practices established to date.

### Achieving high standards of guidance and front-line staff competence

#### Staff Perspectives

##### Key strengths and achievements

The diversity of discussions among focus groups, networks, with leading experts and with the NAG underscore the commitment to training as an essential component of validation services on a number of levels and underlined the timeliness of the consideration.

Consensus was strong on the need for a focus on awareness raising and practical CPD, equipping leaders and practitioners to embed validation within mainstream provision.

As the VISKA project progressed, and where for example the EU Skills Profiling Tool had been tested with refugees and migrants, the issues of cultural sensitivity and of specific skills to work with translators surfaced, more for those for whom this was new than for example for Guidance Counsellors as part of the June NAG meeting discussions.

Migrants and refugees had not been a specific target group as originally envisaged within VISKA Ireland but were included in a broad cohort. In future planning and evaluations targeted work may be important to consider.

The relationship of implementation of training to networks/communities of practice in a continuum of reflective practice is also valuable as is the opportunity to surface and connect learning across different communities of practice. Finding optimum structures to do this efficiently may not be simple.

#### Challenges and Barriers

VISKA as a project sought to establish perceptions on challenges and barriers in relation to validation

according to an agreed set of questions, and to explore how these impacted if at all within the project.

The June 2019 Survey of the NAG- which is 50% policy led and 50% practitioner led- asked the question as to what the challenges were in implementing policy to support validation nationally and or regionally. Individual responses, edited to address frontline and guidance staff competences only included:

- Perceived lack of capacity and resources. Fear of not being able to understand all of the needs presented by applicants or meet their needs
- Bringing groups together
- Funding for learners/applications, employers, providers, guidance. Capacity building including confidence measures, CPD and reflection fora.
- Need to develop a structure
- An Implementation plan supported by all stakeholders and resourced adequately
- Access to relevant information locally
- As above- the tensions and challenges throughout FET, challenges of policy development actually manifesting in local practice; Challenges in identifying and clarifying roles and responsibilities- boundaries and acknowledging the reality that in certain contexts the professional identity and ethos must be recognised and supported- there is a need for National oversight of local delivery. National-regional

Answers were wide ranging. Challenges to be addressed include that there is a desire for overt policy leadership and subsequent prioritisation of strategic elements within an implementation plan that is resourced and allows for dialogue between national and regional structures, with the inclusion of practitioners shaping the way forward.

### Key findings

Consideration of the training module being trialled under VISKA for front line staff (D3.3), was facilitated prior to finalisation as outlined above, in June 2018, and when trialled through discussion with a Focus Group in November 2018 with several national bodies all of whom had varying degrees of responsibility across the range of sectors in education and training, including funding bodies, government departments and quality assurance agencies. Collective engagement was felt to be required between those driving and delivering VPL in order to identify, adapt and translate relevant elements of outputs into policy and practice.

In subsequent discussion with the National Advisory Group, also in November 2018, the question of continuous professional development was felt to be of high importance for national development.

Strategic investment in key staff was recommended so that they in turn could disseminate and lead practice, developing skillsets at local level. Mobility of staff within the sector and the lack of stability of roles was also identified as a risk to systems and infrastructure; it was reflected that it would be important also to ensure that individuals who are upskilled are protected in their roles.

Consideration could be given, it was felt, to the inclusion of practice in initial teacher education. The competing demands of CPD were acknowledged as a potential barrier, necessitating a targeted approach.

Subsequently, over 2019, in one ETB a more novel approach to the hunger for ongoing CPD in relation to validation has been trialled, with highly qualified and skilled professional practitioners who none the less remained anxious about their comprehensive understanding of validation. A cohort presented portfolios themselves based on experiential learning in a routine area of practice for a mid-level NFQ award, experiencing the process from identification, documentation, assessment through to certification. The hands-on approach for skilled experienced and expert practitioners gave different insight and empathy in approaching validation with clients but could be argued to achieve similar objectives to that of the validation module proposed in VISKA at local level.

Throughout all discussions over 2018 and 2019, and as underlined in the national consultation by QQI on assessment, recently published, consensus remains strong that CPD and training in validation is essential. Some broad consensus-based recommendations have been reached as outlined above, and in this, the dialogue stimulated by VISKA has made an important contribution.

## Key Implications

### Implications for future validation process development

The findings of the November 2018 Focus Group and recommendations for levels of CPD include that general awareness, practical skills and more specialist skills provision are sensible in a greenfield context. Assessment training generally must also accommodate the range of practices implicit in validation. These identify the essential key skills for successful engagement with validation.

VISKA surfaced additionally awareness of intercultural sensitivity and skills and practical implications of working with translators; many nuances may also be captured in reflective practice in a quality assurance cycle of continuous improvement, rather than perhaps seeking to address everything in preservice or specific CPD.

### Policy implications

The competence and confidence of staff is considered generally to be critical to any implementation plan, 'Capacity building, including confidence measures', 'resourced adequately' and 'supported by all stakeholders' (NAG survey June 2019).

Policy development and implementation around CPD must acknowledge the different roles of stakeholders and those who engage in parts of validation implementation. Subject matter experts, assessors, authenticators, are all part of the overarching framework for validation implementation currently but may not directly lead. Ultimately over time, as validation becomes an embedded and routine part of services, training for all roles is required in an integrated infrastructure for delivery, with strategic commitment at organizational level of the validation service provider. This in turn suggests diversity of modes of delivery.

The support of national agencies and associations such as Aontas, NCGE, ETBI, Regional Skills Fora etc. is vital in enabling this implementation as our brief trial has shown. This suggests that where a national plan for validation training might be developed, it needs to be consulted on in the usual way. If specific cohorts can adapt elements for their own need, that is helpful. Guidance, for example, has a responsibility to provide impartial advice, but ‘not to “do validation”’<sup>10</sup> ‘Guidance interventions as appropriate at intervals to map progression pathways and options’ are noted in the June 2019 survey of the NAG considering next steps for this cohort. Implementing lifelong learning and adult education policies requires effective interface with guidance services and conversely an awareness amongst guidance practitioners of current practices and initiatives in validation nationally.

#### *Implications of policy*

The competencies and activities of guidance counsellors are set out in the Programme Recognition Framework Guidance Counselling 2016 publication of the Department of Education and Skills.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Implications for policy*

In thinking through implications and messages for policy, these below are perhaps more about optimising policy, joining dots to sweat assets rather than fresh policy innovations. None the less, we believe that they would add significant value without significant cost.

1. Where policies name validation, it would be logical to connect through to a national CPD strategy for FET provision.

While a range of national policies name validation as part of the measures to provide for social inclusion and ongoing economic competitiveness, the direct follow through of validation with training as part of the implementation strategy has not been specifically linked. As an innovative force, such support might assist in further cohesive ‘bedding in’ of validation services and infrastructure.

<sup>10</sup> (Jennifer McKenzie, Director NCGE, May 22, RPL Practitioner Network Meeting, <https://rpl-ireland.ie/> ).

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/Programme-Recognition-Framework-Guidance-Counselling.pdf>

2. Include validation roles and relationships within general Guidance Policies arising from the Review of Guidance with for example, associated identified learning outcomes/CPD as appropriate, or supported communities of practice to enable best practice, as appropriate
3. Consider the development of a national CPD programme in relation to validation, with the content to be proposed cross sectorally for optimum return on investment. Engage the HEI FET Forum as part of the design of the programme so that the modules are equally available as part of initial and post graduate teacher education programmes. Engage also digital development strategies such as SOLAS e-college and other providers so that on-line and blended learning options for provision is optimised.
4. Thematic communities of practice have emerged largely on sectoral lines at national level. At European level these take the form of peer learning activities and seminars most typically, or funded projects, and for those lucky enough to participate in network meetings such as the EQF Advisory Group or the EAEAL. Connectivity between European and national communities is helped by visibility that is meaningful, by a deep engagement beyond social media headlines and alerts. Consider in addition to existing strategies, deeper research calls for example relating to the professionalisation of validation practices, and a series of detailed papers to be published relating to this on specific agreed topics. These could be invited based on evidence from existing projects, and from Country, synthesis and thematic reports produced by CEDEFOP. The issue is that projects, even three-year projects are short and can be complex and ambitious. The real learning may be only emerging as the project concludes.

## Access to and Awareness of Validation services

This chapter provides an analysis of the strategies adopted to increase awareness of and potentially access to validation services in Ireland, including a description of the challenges involved and analysis of the strategy's strengths and achievements.

From April 2018, dissemination of Viska in Ireland was conceived as operating largely through the National Advisory Group, with the provision of reflections back to the project team through the work of the Advisory Group. Opportunities for connection with other initiatives, practices and sectors would be derived from the network reach of the NAG, and together opportunities to disseminate Viska outcomes would be sought. This was most readily done through the range of workshops /focus groups considering the Viska deliverables, hosted prior to the November meeting of the NAG.

A natural concern had been identified in the Viska literature review and elsewhere in prematurely promoting services for validation that did not exist in practice. The objectives in dissemination nationally principally lay in deepening and informing implementation opportunities within and between policy and services.

### Context and aim

Learner awareness of validation opportunities is limited but growing.

Dissemination of Viska, engagement through different networks with the ideas and interventions proposed within Viska for the target cohort have contributed to growing awareness of validation nationally but would not be the only contributing factor.

### Information and dissemination strategies

QQI adopted a dissemination strategy for Viska which comprised

- Utilisation of existing networks and platforms to share Viska concepts, thinking and results, face to face and on-line
- Creation of specific opportunities to share and engage with Viska concepts, thinking and results
- Situating Viska learning and concerns within national and other European learning, concerns, projects and initiatives

### Strengths and achievements

QQI maintained UpToDate information on the Viska project on [www.QQI.ie](http://www.QQI.ie) <sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/VISKA.aspx>

QQI routinely disseminated information about VISKA at external and internal meetings of stakeholders over the duration of the project, particularly at the initial stages, embedding the purpose and identity into general discussions.

The strength of the NAG lay partly in the roles and stance of the organisations represented and in the depth of experience of those participating, thereby enabling connectivity as appropriate.

The provision of focus groups, particularly the November 2018 event while other partners were engaged in field trials, reflected significant strong engagement with VISKA concerns, concepts and ideas. Inputs to the development of deliverables consistently from networks and focus groups was strong.

The consistent engagement of NAG members, particularly practitioners, with the broader context for development, and with VISKA concerns was also a strength and achievement, particularly given the range of commitments and responsibilities carried by those on the NAG.

#### Achievements in relation to access to and awareness of validation services

VISKA operated in context with other projects, initiatives and developments and sought to find commonality and leverage, deepening reflection and aligning interests. While field trials were ongoing elsewhere, this aspect of reflection had particular significance to sustaining the project and meeting requirements.

The lines between dissemination and interrogation of concepts for deep understanding are sometimes blurred.

The outcomes of dissemination would be prized beyond the life of the project, for example the clarity of framework proposed for development of a CPD approach for FET practitioners derived from extensive consultation with specific focus groups and networks over the life of VISKA, and connecting with broader debates at e.g. the RPL Practitioner Network.

These achievements are considered significant because the consolidation of common cause and alignment of interest with partner countries in the breadth of stakeholders is significant in informing our deeper understanding nationally; it provides a forum for 'thought leadership'. One reflection at the June 2019 NAG meeting following discussion of the CEDEFOP Country Factsheet, Adult Population in potential need of upskilling, Ireland (May 2019) was of the immediate opportunity and strength of contribution that validation services had to make in improving the visibility of knowledge, skill and competence in qualifications stocks for the many who had acquired expertise informally and non-formally. This informs strategic planning within the sectors and supports outreach to learners with low levels of qualifications and opportunities to showcase for specific skills, knowledge and

competence.

Some outcomes can lead to recommendations which in turn can shape further development. It is difficult to point to impacts on learner engagement that are solely and only attributable to VSKA. However, over this period, and again with the caveat of incomplete specific data collection and no evaluation of initiatives, approximately three hundred people with lower levels of qualifications accessed validation leading to awards or partial awards at levels 2-6 on the National Framework of Qualifications, on the basis of prior nonformal and informal learning, including in the workforce. VSKA was part of the enabling factor for this process of development within ETBs who would not have envisaged such developments at the commencement of the VSKA project. This figure does not include validation obtained through the NALA Write-on project. It may include some exemptions granted, but typically would reflect a process of development of portfolios of evidence for assessment against particular awards.

The NAG as a network was viewed as useful and is a model used across the system nationally to resolve and progress important issues. While it introduced new elements such as initial teacher education networks, practitioner, provider, learner representative bodies, statutory agencies and government departments together, it was acknowledged at the NAG meeting of November, 2018 by members of the NAG, that in order for real progress to be made, co-ordination is required at national policy lead-level, anticipated to be the Department of Education and Skills. In other words, the NAG could forge, support and stimulate connections among and across key stakeholder groups, but could not resolve key issues requiring ministry-level leadership and decision-making power.

### Challenge and barriers

Addressing challenges and barriers in the generality of consideration of validation nationally, lack of easily publicly available information on validation, and indeed a broader cultural understanding of what it is and means, is an ongoing challenge for learners, employers and society generally. Adult guidance services provide for impartial information and advice including in relation to validation. However, opportunities for validation may not be readily available. Funding for learners to avail of validation can also be unclear. The Aontas research tells us that learners want validation as part of routine approaches within adult education and training services.

Within the limited field testing of the EU Skills Profiling Tool, learners were invited to participate within the specific services who conducted the tests. The test was presented as of the tool itself independent essentially of validation. This question of barriers to validation as experienced by learners in the context of VSKA does not arise in this context.

Within the project itself there was a natural 'trough' for dissemination while other partners were

actively engaged in field trials and data analysis. This was managed through ongoing discussion of core issues of making skills visible for migrants, refugees and people with low levels of skills and qualifications nationally. The conduct of the EU Skills Profile Tool tests with subsequent discussion of feedback at the NAG in June 2019 was helpful in aligning concerns to that of VSKA overall.

Ongoing work in contemporaneous projects are extending opportunities for learners for validation.

### Key findings

From the validation process testing the EU Skills Profiling Tool and subsequent Network discussions including through the NAG, it is clear that people who are deemed low skilled and or low qualified frequently have abundant skills to be made visible and that the process of doing this may be more valuable beyond the recognition itself. This needs to be promoted as a message.

This is consistent with the messages and findings from this chapter to make this opportunity available to this client group, including at multiple routes and service points.

### Key Implications

#### Implications for future validation process development

A key implication for information and access is the separation of governance for both and the recognition of the separate role and function of each, and therefore the different actors involved in both.

In an Irish context concepts of dissemination or information provision, and access are two separate concepts. In a general, as opposed to a limited project sense, dissemination and information provision would involve information about access but would not govern access. Dissemination and information provision would involve different actors and platforms and infer different policy decisions.

Key actors for dissemination and information provision will be FET guidance services, Intreo Case Officers and Public Employment Services, HR professionals, Community Education Facilitators, Citizens Information Officers and Library services as general information sources. There will also be on-line information platforms most of which will provide links to adult guidance services for one-to-one guidance and counselling. The NCGE is one of the lead agencies working with the Department of Education and Skills and Department of Social Protection in the development of appropriate strategies in relation to guidance.

Dissemination of information presupposes access which is both technical and practical for the citizen. Practical issues include clarity around funding- who pays, what eligibilities are there for funding if a

person is employed/unemployed and so on. ‘Technical’ access includes having access to information as to when, where and how validation is available and how it is signposted, supported and provided. Currently access information is frequently at programmatic level and while well presented for learners requires strategic approaches regarding general approaches to validation with a region, service etc.

## Policy implications

### *Implications of policy*

While confidence in the implementation of validation is growing nationally among providers, the absence of overt clarity with regard to strategy and obligation permits the maintenance of the established preference for an offer of a programme place rather promoting support for the range of options including for validation with exemptions, or validation leading to an award.

### *Implications for policy*

Based on the learning identified in this chapter, key messages for policy include that

- clarity relating to funding / infrastructure in services and regionally would assist in providing greater confidence so that concerns about expectations could be met and managed.
- while all providers have technically complied with a requirement to publish quality assurance policies and procedures, including for validation, a voluntary monitoring at local level of implementation in the first instance of validation would assist in raising awareness within provision itself and assist in establishing enhanced data tracking measures.
- a national approach to CPD for practitioners would build confidence further.
- finally, national signposting of opportunities for validation would drive for greater provision, given that research indicates that adult learners want this service as a routine part of their engagement. INTREO is beginning to engage with service users/customers in this way but without necessarily following through in terms of validation.

## Conclusions: answering the evaluation questions

Four research questions underpinned the VISKA evaluation.

1. To what degree did partners achieve the implementation aim across the five intervention strategies, and what factors at local, regional and national and policy level appeared to influence the achievement of implementation aims?
2. What outcomes were achieved for what groups, and to what degree?
3. What factors were associated with the achievement of positive learner outcomes?
4. What policy-level factors were associated with the achievement of positive learner outcomes?

In this section we address each of the evaluation questions. Key messages for future validation process/ system development are also outlined.

To what degree did partners achieve the implementation aim across the five intervention strategies, and what factors at local, regional and national and policy level appeared to influence the achievement of implementation aims?

### Policy level factors associated with the achievement of positive learner outcomes

The VISKA Ireland testing of the EU Skills Profiling tool resulted in a direct engagement with 32 refugees or migrants by expert practitioners, mainly guidance counsellors and community education facilitators in both urban and rural settings, and was the only intervention directly associated with learners. The experience of the tool was mixed, and reflections varied; the intervention depended on no policy level decision nor has any direct policy level decision subsequently been made; the trial reaffirmed convictions of skill levels that are unidentified and untapped and of the power of naming and ‘owning’ the capacity to identify ones skills. It also stimulated and supported decisions which might be regarded as policy within two communities of practice to provide validation training on one hand, and deeper engagement with role clarification in another.

Key messages/ lessons are discussed below:

- VISKA has consolidated a view that national networks combining policy and practice perspectives, including from different government departments and agencies are important not only to service validation but also for improved targeted measures for specific cohorts. There is also an acknowledgement of the importance of ‘focus groups’ / Communities of Practice within Networks to be able to reflect deeply on specific issues cross sectorally so as to inform emerging thinking, both nimbly and with generosity.

- There is a strong consensus on the value of the process of validation sometimes beyond the technical outcome. There is also a strong consensus on the value of on-going documented evaluation and reflection in order to develop all aspects of relevant services in a nuanced way.
- The field trial focus while unanticipated altered perceptions and surfaced a concern that we are not as prepared as we might be to work with migrants and refugees as a community of education and training practitioners, notwithstanding specific pockets of expertise, and that similar communities might also require nuanced services of which we are unaware.
- Digital tools to be effective need to be efficient and locally situated. Guidance practitioners feel that a skilled interview can be as effective in terms of outcomes for the client. That is not to infer any resistance to digital tools nor an interoperability between services in their use.
- A clearer single more coherent policy lead would eliminate uncertainties at regional level and provide for an implementation plan.
- Continuous professional development is desirable.

### Pre-existing success enablers

The RPL Practitioner Network Ireland provides a national network with a capacity to draw together cross sectoral validation practitioners on a voluntary basis. The Regional Skills Fora provide for regional networking between key stakeholders regarding skills needs. A wide range of sectoral networks exist across practitioner groups that will facilitate linkages from the Community Education Facilitators Association to Adult Education Organisers Association, or the Further Education Network Forum for example.

However, over the course of VISKA as a project the Department of Education and Skills has also commenced an implementation group for Upskilling Pathways which is cross Departmental and includes some lead agencies nationally. This kind of model could also strategically support future success.

## Recommendations:

### Networks

- The national commitment to dialogue is valuable and should be formally extended with regard to validation, including for certain communities and periodically cross sectorally to ensure efficiencies and cohesion.
- A balance must be struck between being open and building expertise and assuring continuous succession planning and optimising 'deep diving' among experts on specific themes/topics as required.
- Effective and powerful as networks are, a clear coherent policy would eliminate uncertainties at regional level and provide for an overarching implementation plan within which networks would operate.

### Quality

- A range of tools including digital tools that provide for interoperability between systems and services should continue to be worked towards but should be presumed to be optional for service users and capable of being complementary to the work of skilled practitioners
- A continuous professional development framework is desirable
- Services need opportunities for holistic and inclusive routine evaluation and reflection in order to provide an evidence base for incremental improvement and efficacy

### Requirements for successful validation in the context of VISKA learning

Validation processes are successful when they are nuanced and because they are routinely adequately reflected on and evaluated based on evidence. This means locating a requirement for evaluation into provision and facilitating same within resourcing and scheduling in an open way.

The field trial focus while unanticipated altered perceptions and surfaced a concern that we are not as prepared as we might be to work with migrants and refugees as a community of education and training practitioners, notwithstanding specific pockets of expertise. The NAG was not inclusive of specific experts in relation to migrants and refugees.

In order to make validation for this target audience as successful as possible, a specific strand of validation work should be undertaken working with refugees and migrants but also accommodating NARIC services and should be monitored and reviewed for learning.

Similar projects/learning strands should be undertaken with other specific cohorts individually rather than as a broad general community to seek out differences and promote greater awareness so that our inclusion models truly are inclusive.

### Policy implications and recommendations

The VISKA Ireland field trial was conducted in isolation. It was as an intervention simply designed to gather feedback on the experience of use of the tool.

In relation to networks, at National Level there are a range of effective networks including the Regional Skills Fora which derive from National Skills Policy and connect stakeholders at regional level.

### Implications of policy

No policies, national or regional directly impacted on the conduct of the field trial or the National Advisory Group as an expression of the interventions to extend and develop networks, or to extend or adapt tools including digitisation.

In terms of the challenges from existing policies to the VISKA project or similar, perhaps it is true to say that the range of national policies in which validation is referenced is extensive without necessarily being matched with clarity of ownership and implementation/co-ordination; similarly, publicly funded VET targets tend to focus on the provision of programmes. The implication of this is that while there was no policy impediment to VISKA, neither is there a direct policy 'home' for learning in order to build on progress.

### Key lessons learned from the VISKA project include that

1. Implementation of the limited intervention to test the EU skills Profiling Tool underlined the value of making visible the range of skills held by migrants and refugees through a formal documentation process, beyond the process itself.
2. Measures addressing people who are low skilled or low qualified should be 'validation proofed' to provide for appropriate opportunities for the identification, documentation, assessment and certification of skills and competences on a voluntary basis from the outset of engagement as appropriate.
3. The availability of validation services ideally is signposted and co-ordinated, and conditions are optimal where policy, strategy and services work together.

These lessons somewhat relate to a range of other policies set out below.

## Field trial and refugees and migrants

The national policy context for working with migrants is determined largely by the Migrant Integration Strategy 2017-2021. This policy does not reference validation of skills.

<sup>13</sup>This lack of specific reference to validation is not the case for other minority or ethnic groups, for example, Traveller and Roma who are regarded as having distinct ethnic culture.

<sup>14</sup><sup>15</sup>*Additionally, an Action Plan to promote Traveller participation in Higher Education has been announced re referencing existing commitments to validation* <sup>16</sup>

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<http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/The%20Migrant%20Integration%20Strategy%202017-2020.pdf/Files/The%20Migrant%20Integration%20Strategy%202017-2020.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-20-2021 is among the many policies that reference RPL, with a policy to be developed by 2018.

<sup>15</sup> <http://justice.ie/en/JELR/National%20Traveller%20and%20Roma%20Inclusion%20Strategy.%202017-2021.pdf/Files/National%20Traveller%20and%20Roma%20Inclusion%20Strategy,%202017-2021.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> (Actions 34 and 35 in Appendix 2)

- <sup>16</sup>**Action 34.** *The Department of Education and Skills will develop a national policy on recognition of prior learning by 2018, which will benefit Travellers and Roma as well as other target groups identified in the National Access Plan.*
- **Action 35.** *The Department of Education and Skills will develop an accessible and inclusive model of Recognition of Prior Learning in collaboration with Traveller and Roma organisations to support the accreditation and employment of Travellers and Roma.*

*Within FET and Community Education provision the range of policies <sup>17</sup> continue to provide impetus for action in validation in the field of practice.*

*Additionally, while new strategies are in preparation for the new decade as appropriate, implementation work continues for Upskilling Pathways <sup>18</sup>*

*The original provisions of the legislation governing QQI have been amended (November 2019) to reflect the practicality that QQI works closely with providers to respond to individual RPL applications.*

*<sup>19</sup>The SOLAS FET Professional Development Strategy 2017-2019 does not overtly reference validation nor many other specific areas of practice but is sufficiently open to enable identification of this field as an area for CPD <sup>20</sup>Opportunities are about to commence being offered by ETBI, treating with validation. The question of cultural sensitivity is broader and seems to lack a specific home.*

*(<http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/SolasFETPDS.pdf>)*

## Implications and recommendations of policy

Implications for policy are proposed arising from the VISKA project in Ireland according to three themes- a desire that is articulated for coordination, including of information and data interoperability and a need for CPD provision.

- 1 From the field trial testing the digital tool, issues around data interoperability arose. If a client interfaces independently they may need to link to public employment services platforms, or to education and training platforms, or guidance service platforms for example and navigate freely between. This requires design and continued testing from the outset, not only with independent users but also within a range of support structures. Questions such as how a person might develop their statement of skills through to an evidence base, and whether or how this can be supported online is of interest. Tools are developed by individual organisations and agencies, separately. This may be less a policy than a co-

<sup>17</sup> (Further Education and Training Strategy, 2014-2019, Better Outcomes Brighter Futures (DCYA), 2014-2020, Action Plan for Education 2016-2019, Cumasu (Goal 4.5, App 10.8.3-10.8.8), National Skills Strategy 2025, National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021 (p55 Goal 4.2), National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021, Skills to Advance Policy Framework, Supporting working lives and enterprise growth in Ireland 2018-2021, QQI Statement of Strategy 2019-2021 (p11))

<sup>18</sup> (2016 Council Recommendation addressing the needs of people who are low skilled and low qualified).

<sup>19</sup> (<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2019/act/32/enacted/en/html>)

<sup>20</sup> (Goal 2.6).

ordination and seed funding question but should be efficiently planned, communicated and iteratively tested across the diversity of provision through all available networks.

- 2 The framework for continuous professional development within VET and provision for upskilling in validation practices is within scope below national policy level. VISKA underlined an appetite for a consistent national approach to training and upskilling for practitioners.
- 3 At national policy level, there is a desire for co-ordination of the range of policies and strategies, including the interface of access to guidance and signposting of opportunities for validation for adults

Some learning from VISKA can inform improvements to policy and is discussed below.

### Networks

The interface of the diversity of practitioners and policy makers in a network such as the National Advisory Group, is effective in closing gaps and bringing new perspectives. It is important to think across the lifespan of practice, contexts of engagement and cohorts. This may not all necessarily happen within one group but mechanisms need to be found for effective engagement.

It can be particularly enriched by subgroups/focus group networks dealing with particular topics and feeding back in, including where informed by specific evidence-based interventions, even small in scale.

### Tool

Digital tools are of interest and use, both as a support to dialogue and for independent use by clients. They raise issues around expectations and connectivity.

### Validation Outcomes

VISKA also as has been noted above, underlined that the process of validation is as valuable as the outcomes, and sometimes more so. There is sometimes an abundance of skills to be made visible that is otherwise not noted.

Learning from VISKA suggests that the policy environment for validation could be enhanced through

- Clarity about strategic coordination and prioritisation would greatly empower action at local and regional level.

- At minimum, policies addressing the needs of people who have low levels of qualifications and or skills should be 'validation proofed' i.e. should ensure that an opportunity is given to the person to evaluate whether validation is a process that might be of interest to them on a voluntary basis.

### General policy reflections

Reflections that another country might take from VISKA Ireland regarding policy would include that innovators will 'own' policy and find space to innovate; social inclusion is a strong cultural driver across public VET because of the range of policies addressing these concerns. Therefore, commitment to inclusion-oriented projects and innovations is likely to be high.

### VISKA based policy recommendations

Recommendations from VISKA in Ireland are framed so that they can be implemented at regional, national or EU level in as far as is possible:

- 1 Coordination and visibility of validation policy/strategy and services is optimum for the ready recognition of knowledge, skill and competence howsoever acquired. A decision is required across those responsible for policy in this regard, whether at local, regional or national level.
- 2 Any policy instruments designed to serve people, regardless of profile, with low levels of qualifications and or skills need to include opportunities on a voluntary basis for validation, i.e. identification, documentation, assessment and certification as appropriate
- 3 Invest in and further enable the development of communities of practice that are open and inclusive, but that also provide for engagement across diversity of sector, and between policy and practice actors
- 4 Explore the development of digital tools that serve identification as a prelude to validation benefits from engagement with multiple actors, including guidance, education and training practitioners, validation mentors, public employment service staff and HR experts; explore also the link with ESCO and occupational skills strengths of the EU Skills Profiling Tool
- 5 Reflection on transversal skills is an important part of a validation process even where it does not result in summative assessment outcomes. Policy measures evaluating the merit of validation should not rest solely on certification outcomes.
- 6 Policy measures for CPD for those engaged in FET, including in the diversity of sectors

(youth and community, HR and nonformal provision in companies and accessible through Skillnet Ireland, social partnership models and private provision) should include a validation framework.

- 7 The commitment to reflective practice and ongoing evaluation and development of an evidence base is important within provision of services; within this and tied to the development of community of practice models, specific attention needs to be paid to cohorts such as minorities including migrants and refugees to ensure that we are truly inclusive and holistic in our approaches to validation services.