



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

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Holistic Quality Assurance Measure for Validation Services

Lead partner: ETSC

Deliverable 3.4

September 2018

Dissemination Level: Public

D3.4 Holistic Quality Assurance Measure for Validation Services

This document presents quality assurance criteria developed in the VISKA project focusing on holistically covering the main quality factors of validation processes. The criteria will be tried out in the project field trials and feedback gathered on usability. The deliverable can be adjusted and used in other validation contexts by various stakeholders involved in planning and conducting validation measures.

To support quality issues on policy level the Roadmap 2018 developed by the Nordic network for adult learning can be applied (see: <https://nvl.org/Content/Validation-and-the-value-of-competences-Road-Map-2018>).

Development of a “set of quality assurance standards” in the VISKA project

For quality assurance to function, it is crucial to set up a system focusing on evaluation, review of findings and further quality improvement based on results. This can be conducted on a system level, where the Roadmap 2018 (NVL, 2015) could be used as a standard and at provider level which is more in focus in the VISKA project. Following the flow of the [quality cycle](http://www.eqavet.eu) (www.eqavet.eu) with set dates on regular quality assurance activities is recommended.

In order to approach the development of a **set of quality assurance standards which can be applied universally (not context specific) to measure the quality of validation services**, the VISKA partnership is leaning on the below mentioned resources in addition to the ones listed at the end of this paper. The aim is to produce a practical list of standards which can be the basis for further development of quality assurance systems in various contexts, including validation services for migrants and low-qualified.

Based on mapping of various quality factors (see Annex 1) and an existing tool called Quality kit for VPL (coordinated by The agency for Higher Education, Adult Education, Qualifications and Study Grants, in Belgium-Flanders partner), the following set of quality assurance standards have been identified:

	Quality standard	In place	Not sufficient	Comments
1.	Accessibility			
1.1	Information about the VPL procedure and pathways is clear, complete and publicly visible/available			
1.2	Outreach measures are in place focusing on reaching specific target groups (introducing validation possibilities)			
1.3	The set-up, coordination and financing of the VPL pathway is clear and secure			
1.4	It is clear how, where and whom the participant contacts in order to receive guidance regarding validation possibilities			

1.5	The requirements to participate in the different phases of the VPL procedure are clearly defined			
1.6	The costs to participate in the VPL procedure are transparent and known in advance			
1.7	The learning outcomes/competencies that will be assessed are available to the potential participant			
1.8	The guidelines and criteria for the preparation of a dossier (portfolio, competence folder – e.g. Europass ...) are clear and available on time for the participant			
1.9	The participant receives guidance in identifying, and documenting competences as well as the collection and organization of evidence (portfolio, comp. folder)			
1.10	The provider ensures eliminating barriers so that eligible candidates can participate (financial, discrimination, accessibility, opening hours, disability, etc.)			
2. Transparency				
2.1	The purpose of the VPL procedure is clearly defined (access to job or studies, exemption, study length shortening, certificate, qualification, ...)			
2.2	The progress of the procedure is transparent and known by the participant before the start of the procedure (4 phased validation)			
2.3	The time-schedule for the procedure is realistic, feasible and known in advance			
2.4	The way in which participants are assessed is transparent and known in advance			
2.5	The criteria of the evidence are clear and known in advance (authenticity, actuality, relevance, quantity, variation in contexts)			
2.6	The competencies that will be assessed are known by the applicant before the start of the assessment			
2.7	The standards used are linked to the National Qualification System (if the context allows)			
2.8	The decision-making processes are clear and known in advance (<i>e.g. consensus, assessment conclusions, how results are documented etc.</i>)			

2.9	The results of the procedure are presented clearly (<i>explains the relationship between the competencies of the participant and the standard</i>)			
2.10	On the VPL-confirmation (certificate) that the participant receives at the end of the procedure, at least the competencies of the participant are mentioned in relation to the standards, the date of assessment, as well as the required information determined by the decree.			
2.11	The participant can receive additional information or get feedback on the results of the procedure at any point in time.			
2.12	The participant will get accurate information and guidance about his/her opportunities after finishing the VPL procedure and shall, if necessary, referred towards further competence development.			
2.13	The role and qualifications/competences required of all validation staff are clearly described (<i>supervisor, assessor, advisor/counsellor, administration, coordinator, etc...</i>)			
3. Assessment				
3.1	The assessment methods used are suitable for the testing of the respective competencies (<i>independent of the learning route</i>), and the needs of the candidate			
3.2	The applied assessment methodologies and instruments are valid (measuring what they need to measure)			
3.3	The assessment methodologies and instruments used are reliable (give repeatedly in the same conditions the same outcomes, are not liable to coincidence)			
3.4	Each competency is tested adequately in order to reach a reliable conclusion (<i>on several occasions, mix of methods, etc...</i>)			
3.5	The competencies that will be reviewed are current and validated			
3.6	Each competency is assessed through reliable methods based on the participant's needs and learning style			

3.7	The independence and impartiality of the assessors is ensured (<i>conflict avoidance</i>)			
3.8	The assessors are professionals in the competencies that will be assessed			
3.9	The assessors are working in the field of adult education and training or in the sector at hand (recognized by stakeholders linked to standards used)			
3.11	Within a VPL procedure, the assessment procedure and criteria are the same for all participants			
4. Rights of the individual				
4.1	Participation in the VPL procedure is voluntary and may be terminated at any time by the candidate			
4.2	The inserted original evidence is owned by the participant and is treated in a confidential manner			
4.3	The VPL proof is owned by the participant			
4.4	The participant is informed in advance about the complaints and appeal procedure			
4.5	The privacy and personal integrity of the participant is guaranteed			
4.6	The information collected within the VPL procedure is not passed to persons that are not part of the VPL procedure, unless the participant gives his/her written consent			
4.7	The participant has the right to see his VPL file and, if necessary, to change his personal data			
4.8	The participant will be informed - within a reasonable time, known in advance - about the results of the validation procedure			
4.9	Candidates in the VPL procedure are not obliged to enter any follow-up program that the organization offers (training, career guidance, job placement, etc.)			
5. Professionalism				
5.1	VPL procedures/projects are developed in consultation with all stakeholders and widely supported within the organization			

5.2	Functions and qualifications/competences are correctly and professionally executed by all involved (<i>supervisor, assessor, administration, advisor/counsellors, coordinator, ...</i>)			
5.3	The roles of guidance counsellor and assessor are separated and clearly defined			
5.4	Guidance counsellors and assessors are professionals with the right skills for the job			
5.5	Guidance counsellors and assessors stay up to date in their skills			
5.6	Guidance counsellors and assessors go through appropriate training in VPL procedures			
5.7	Guidance counsellors and assessors working in a VPL procedure follow ethical codes (<i>no discrimination, professional secrecy, confidentiality...</i>)			
6. Quality assurance				
6.1	The evaluation of the VPL procedure is structurally embedded in the quality management system of the Organization			
6.2	All components of the VPL procedure are regularly evaluated			
6.3	All relevant actors are involved in the evaluation (<i>participant, guidance counsellor, assessor, working life, training providers,...</i>)			
6.4	There is an accessible complaint and appeal procedure in place			
6.5	The data from the complaints and appeal procedure will be included in the evaluation			
6.6	There is a transparent and up to date registration system in which all the relevant information about the results and stages are included, in line with European data protection regulations.			
6.7	The effect of VPL for the participant is followed up and evaluated (<i>employment opportunities, training results, etc...</i>)			
6.8	An improvement policy is formulated and implemented, based on the results of the evaluation			

6.9	There is a strategic communication policy on the VPL offer so that the intended audience is reached			
6.10	Relevant customers of VPL (sectors, employers, training providers) are involved in the VPL policies of the provider			
6.11	Evaluation of VPL measures are conducted regularly, results documented, and improvement plan followed			

An example of an action plan for quality improvement

Action plan on quality improvement for VPL procedures				
Date of evaluation:				
Contact person:				
	Improvement of action	Evidence of improvement	Confirmed by	Date
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				

Backing sources

European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning

As stated in the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning (CEDEOP, 2015), trust in the validation process relies heavily on the front-line staff conducting the process. It relies also on the organizational aspects surrounding validation, in regards to cooperation of stakeholders, coherence of practices and overall quality measures used.

While 4 phased validation arrangements are in place in many European countries, holistic quality assurance factors for measuring the outcomes of the services provided are not as frequently in place. This paper provides a ***set of quality assurance criteria which can be applied universally (not context specific) to measure the quality of validation services.***

The European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning are written for individuals and institutions responsible for the initiation, development, implementation and operation of validation arrangements. The guidelines were first presented as the European principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in 2004, to be updated and revised in 2009 and 2015. See: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/3073>

The guidelines are a result of cooperation between the European Commission and Member States. They contain well defined elements for the various aspects of validation, and, based on the wide consultation it presents a foundation for international quality assurance standards for validation.

In the 2009 version of the guidelines there are 10 fundamental principles underpinning validation identified. They are the following:

- Validation must be voluntary.
- The privacy of individuals should be respected.
- Equal access and fair treatment should be guaranteed.
- Stakeholders should be involved in establishing systems for validation.
- Systems should contain mechanisms for guidance and counselling of individuals.
- Systems should be underpinned by quality assurance.
- The process, procedures and criteria for validation must be fair, transparent and underpinned by quality assurance.
- Systems should respect the legitimate interests of stakeholders and seek balanced participation.
- The process of validation must be impartial and avoid conflicts of interest.
- The professional competences of those who carry out assessments must be assured.

Supporting quality assurance development

In the 2015 version of the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning, 10 key questions are identified linked to the themes identified in the Council Recommendation, 2012 regarding the implementation of validation.

Key questions on the implementation of validation

- Has the purpose of the validation initiative been clarified (Section 2.1)?
- How does the validation initiative respond to the interests of the individual citizen (Section 2.2)?

- Have steps been taken to coordinate and target guidance and counselling services (Section 3.1)?
- Are mechanisms for coordination of relevant stakeholders in place, to avoid fragmentation and ensure a coherent approach (Section 3.2)?
- Are validation arrangements linked to national qualifications frameworks (Section 3.3) and how does this impact transparency and access?
- Do the outcomes of validation refer to the same or equivalent standards as those used for formal education (Section 3.4) and how does this affect its value and currency?
- Are validation arrangements linked to quality assurance arrangements (Section 3.5) and how does this influence trust and credibility?
- What steps have been taken to strengthen the professional competences of validation practitioners (Section 3.6)?
- What is the role of validation in education and training systems (Section 4.1); in relation to the labour market (Sections 4.2 and 4.3); and in the voluntary sector (Section 4.4)?
- Which tools and instruments can be used (and combined) for identification, documentation and assessment of learning (Chapter 5)?

In the European guidelines on validation of non-formal and informal learning (2015), the overall quality of validation depends on a range of factors reflecting the character and complexity of the process. Ensuring and improving quality is complex but needs to be applied following the principles of the quality circle: plan, do, check and change. While the specific form of the quality process will vary between countries and contexts, ***the following issues have to be considered when developing a quality strategy for validation (according to section 3,5 in the EU guidelines):***

(a) fitness for purpose is of critical importance. There are many methods for judging evidence of learning: the choice of method (or combination of methods) must be sensitive to the learning form and context;

(b) the safety, security, confidentiality and consistency of the process must be ensured and continuously improved. The candidate's initial and continuing engagement with the process, from identification to certification, must not be compromised by lack of trust, which can result in reduced motivation to proceed;

(c) the process must be reliable, and lead to trusted results. The evidence documented for an individual must be valid and be directly related to the standards used for validation. The candidate must feel confident that interpretation of evidence and standards is thorough and not based on arbitrary judgements;

(d) standards are the basis of measuring learning outcomes and validation. They must exist in a clear and unambiguous form that the key stakeholders support. Systematic quality assurance of standards, and how these are defined and reviewed, is crucial to generate reliability, validity, consistency and trust;

(e) quality assurance arrangements should support the long-term implementation of validation. Sustainability is a must for processes to be trusted. Going through validation is often expensive for individuals and it is important to put in place permanent arrangements which are known to, and valued in, society at large and/or in the particular sector.

EU Council Recommendation of 2012

In addition to the European Guidelines, the EU Council Recommendation of 2012 also calls for action regarding quality assurance measures which will underpin the validation activity within memberstates. In particular attention should be given to the following;

- (a) the validation arrangements are linked to national qualifications frameworks and are in line with the European Qualifications Framework;
- (b) information and guidance on the benefits of, and opportunities for validation, as well as on the relevant procedures, are available to individuals and organisations;
- (e) the validation of non-formal and informal learning is supported by appropriate guidance and counselling and is readily accessible;
- (f) transparent quality assurance measures in line with existing quality assurance frameworks are in place that support reliable, valid and credible assessment methodologies and tools;
- (g) provision is made for the development of the professional competences of staff involved in the validation process across all relevant sectors;

As identified in the EU Council Recommendation of 2012 tools such as Europass and Youthpass should be used to facilitate the documentation of learning outcomes. There should also be synergies between validation arrangements and the credit systems of ECTS and ECVET.

An established association between existing systems and emerging validation arrangements aids in the development of a robust quality assured process.

Validation and the value of competences – Roadmap 2018 (NVL, 2015)

The validation specialist network operating within the Nordic network for adult learning (NVL) published a report, Road Map 2018, on quality issues in validation in 2015 which has the aim to provide a benchmark between countries and their various systems for validation. The aim is also to illustrate the validation process from mapping and assessment of prior competences all the way to how these results can benefit the individual and society. The report highlights the central aspects that must be covered to facilitate a functional and smooth validation system. The standards set forth in the report can be used for self-evaluation purposes, resulting in a spider-diagram revealing strong and weak points of national systems (see link to the report in the last section on “Other resources”).

Other resources

European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning:

<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/3073>

Holistic guidelines of VPL procedures.

UNESCO GUIDELINES for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002163/216360e.pdf>

The guidelines describe six areas for action at national level linked to lifelong strategy; accessibility of VPL, integrating VPL into educational systems, creating coordinated national structure involving all stakeholders, building capacities of VPL personnel, designing sustainable funding mechanisms.

Quality in Validation of Prior Learning – Experiences from Work with the Nordic Model for Quality in Validation of Prior Learning: <http://liu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1197887/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

The Nordic Model can be seen as a structured way to assess the current situation in validation at an institutional level and to identify areas of development. The research does not focus on the quality itself, but on the process of quality work and the process in the cases.

Validation and the value of competences, Roadmap 2018, NVL 2015:

<https://nvl.org/Content/Validation-and-the-value-of-competences-Road-Map-2018>

The aim of Road Map 2018 is to illustrate the validation process from mapping and assessment of prior competences all the way to how these results can benefit the individual and society. The report highlights the central aspects that must be covered to facilitate a functional and smooth validation system.

Quality kit for VPL from Flanders-Belgium: <http://erkennenvancompetenties.be/evc-professionals/evc-toolbox/>

Self-assessment form and action plan for improvement for VPL providers developed in Flanders-Belgium (coordinated by the Agency of Higher Education, Adult Education, Qualifications and Study Grants, in Belgium-Flanders)

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning:

<https://eurlex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ%3AC%3A2012%3A398%3A0001%3A0005%3AEN%3APDF>

Quality standards for competence assessment with people with a migration background:

<https://www.migranet.org>

Erasmus KA2 project on VPL for migrants.

Quality Model for Validation in the Nordic Countries, 2014: <https://nvl.org/Content/Quality-Model-for-Validation-in-the-Nordic-Countries>

This brochure is the final report for the project “Quality Model for Validation in the Nordic Countries – a development project 2012-13”

Nordic Competence Profiles of Validation Practitioners and Competence Development – A mapping project 2014-15: <https://nvl.org/Content/Nordiska-kompetensprofiler-for-de-som-arbetar-med-validering>

This report is the result of a Nordplus project where five members of the NVL Validation network have mapped the competences and competence development needed for those working with validation. The work has been carried out 2014-2015. All five Nordic countries are represented.

Guidance in validation within the Nordic region, NVL – 2015: <https://nvl.org/Content/Guidance-in-validation-within-the-Nordic-region>

This report is produced by the Nordic Network for Adult Learning (NVL) through combined efforts of the Guidance and Validation networks. It provides information and discussion on how guidance in the process of validation of prior learning (VPL) is carried out within the Nordic region. The purpose of the report is to establish a common ground for discussing and developing guidance in validation, which will hopefully be a step towards seeking opportunities for improving the quality of guidance in Nordic validation systems.

European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET): (www.equvet.eu)

European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) brings together the EU Member States, the Social Partners and the European Commission to develop and improve quality assurance in European VET systems within the context of the implementation of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework

European Quality Mark (EU/Leonardo project deliverables):

<http://www.europeanqualitymark.org/home/index.html>

The EQM is a quality mark initially jointly developed by partners from eight European countries in a Leonardo da Vinci partnership project. The products are used on Iceland for accreditation of educational providers. In Iceland, standards have also be developed for accrediting VPL and adult guidance for people with little formal education.