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Cross-country report

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Disclaimer

The content of this report is a synthesis of the final national country reports prepared by the VISKA project partners. Whilst every effort has been made to accurately collate and represent the findings of all partners in this document, because of the diversity in national contexts the detailed National Implementation and Evaluation reports available at <https://viskaproject.eu/results/> are the most complete and definitive documents.

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Glossary

Participant	A person taking part in something (Webster) – in this context the participant is a person taking part in the VPL process.
Learner	A person who is learning a subject or skill (Webster).
Candidate	This term is used interchangeably with participant and learner throughout the text
Integration Reception Centres	Centres where asylum seekers who are likely to be granted asylum, are offered a full-time programme with activities such as Norwegian language training, social science and work-based learning.
Reception Centres	Centres for all asylum seekers who arrive in Norway. They stay there while their status is being decided.
Educational qualification	<p>An educational qualification indicates what you need to know and be able to do in order to undertake further studies, to participate in society or to practice a certain profession.</p> <p>Source: http://vlaamsekwalficatiestructuur.be/onderwijskwalificaties.</p> <p>In Flanders an 'educational qualification' in adult education is actually the combination of a vocational certification with a certificate of the course of AGE, which leads to a diploma of Secondary education.</p>
Examination Board of Secondary Education	Unqualified people can obtain their diploma of Secondary Education through self-study without supervision by taking exams provided by the Examination Board.
MACUSA	A module of 'Society – Culture – Cooperation' in the course of additional general education which contains a range of transversal skills. It is divided in four units which contains the three aspects separately and one overarching unit.
Orientation certificate B	An orientation certificate B means that the pupil is allowed to 'proceed' to the next level, but that the pupil is excluded from a number of disciplines. If the pupil still wants to follow one of the excluded courses of study, he has to repeat the same level.

Source: [Onderwijs en Vorming - diploma's en getuigschriften](#)

Soft transversal skills

Interpersonal skills which can be applied to any job. They include communication skills, listening skills, and empathy, among others. These are much harder to define and evaluate.

Source: <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/what-are-soft-skills-2060852>

Special needs education (BUSO)

Special needs education Secondary school (BUSO) concerns young people with a disability or young people with learning, educational or behavioural difficulties.

Vocational qualification

A vocational qualification indicates what you need to know and be able to do in order to practice a certain profession

Source: <http://vlaamsekwalficatiestructuur.be/beroepskwalificaties>

Waterfall effect

The waterfall effect, or waterfall syndrome, is a Flemish term used in Secondary education means that a pupil starts in a more difficult (theoretical) form of education and after one or more failures, chooses for an easier (often more practical) study.

Abbreviations

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.
AGE	Additional General Education – <i>Aanvullende algemene vorming</i>
AHOVOKS	Flemish Agency for Higher Education, Adult Education, Qualifications and Study Grants – <i>Agentschap voor Hoger Onderwijs, Volwassenenonderwijs, kwalificaties en studietoelagen</i>
Aontas	National Adult Learning Organisation; <i>advocating for the rights of all adults in Ireland for quality lifelong learning</i>
ASO	General Secondary education – <i>Algemeen Secundair Onderwijs</i>
BSO	Vocational Secondary education – <i>Beroeps Secundair Onderwijs</i>
BUSO	Special needs education for Secondary school – <i>Buitengewoon Secundair Onderwijs</i>
CAE	Centre of Adult Education – <i>Centrum voor Volwassenenonderwijs</i>
CPD	Continuous Professional Development – <i>Professionele ontwikkeling</i>
DBSO	Part-time Vocational Secondary education – <i>Deeltijds Beroepssecundair Onderwijs</i>
DEASP	The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
DET	Department of Education and Training – <i>Departement Onderwijs & Vorming</i>
EC	Examination Board of Secondary Education – <i>Examencommissie Secundair Onderwijs</i>

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.
ETSC	Education and Training Service Centre/ <i>Fræðslumiðstöð atvinnulífsins</i>
EVC	Validation of Prior learning – <i>Erkennen van eerder verworven competenties</i>
EVK	Recognition of prior qualifications – <i>Erkennen van verworven kwalificaties</i>
FET	Further Education and Training, also known as VET or vocational education and training in Europe
GO!	Education of the Flemish Community - <i>Gemeenschapsonderwijs</i>
KSO	Arts Secondary education – <i>Kunst Secundair Onderwijs</i>
MESC	Ministry of education, science and culture
MSS	Centre for lifelong learning at Suðurnes
NAG	National Advisory Group – <i>Vlaams Adviescomité</i>
NALA	The National Adult Literacy Agency
NAV	The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, working through municipal welfare/PES offices
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
NT2	Dutch as a second language – <i>Nederlands als tweede taal</i>

OVSG	Educational Association of Cities and Municipalities of the Flemish Community - <i>Onderwijsvereniging van Steden en Gemeenten van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap</i>
PBD	Pedagogical Advisory Services – <i>Pedagogische begeleidingsdiensten</i>
POBAL	support communities and local agencies toward achieving social inclusion and development on behalf of a range of government departments
POV	Provincial Education Flanders – <i>Provinciaal Onderwijs Vlaanderen</i>
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland; an independent State agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland.
SCE	Second Chance Education – <i>Tweedekansonderwijs</i>
SLMRU	Skills and Labour Market Research Unit
SOLAS	The Further Education and Training Authority, with responsibility for funding, planning and co-ordinating Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland
TSO	Technical Secondary Education – <i>Technisch Secundair Onderwijs</i>
VOCVO	Flemish Support Centre for Adult Education – <i>Vlaams ondersteuningscentrum voor het volwassenenonderwijs</i>
VOOP	Flemish Education Consultation Platform – <i>Vlaams Onderwijs Overlegplatform</i>
VPL	Validation of Prior Learning

Executive Summary

This summary presents the synthesis of the cross-country evaluation of the Erasmus+ funded 'Making Adult Learning Visible' (VISKA) project. The evaluation was conducted by CIT (Cork Institute of Technology), in close collaboration with the project and evaluation teams in partner countries. A range of more detailed National Implementation and Evaluation reports are available at <https://viskaproject.eu/results/>.

About the VISKA project

The VISKA project aimed 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 the partner countries.

In particular, VISKA addressed the need to make the skills of low-skilled¹ adults, migrants², asylum seekers³ and refugees⁴ more visible, in order to enhance their employability, improve their access to education and training offers and support active engagement in society in four countries; Norway, Iceland, Flanders and Ireland. The project ran from March 2017 to February 2020 and was managed and coordinated by Skills Norway.

At the core of the VISKA project was a validation pilot targeted at those who were deemed low-skilled, migrants or refugees with prior learning for which they could seek formal validation with a particular focus on access to the workplace and/or education opportunities.

The implementation of VISKA varied across the partner countries but the project was focused on five implementation objectives:

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

¹ 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. Where the term low-skilled is used in this report it is used to give consistency with the proposal document.

² 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.

³ 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.

⁴ 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)

- **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
- 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
- **Training and / or Capacity building** for guidance counsellors and other frontline staff working on the validation of NFIL, including with specific adult beneficiary groups
- Improving **access to and awareness of validation** services and support among specific adult beneficiary groups

Through the combination of these five intervention strategies, countries aimed to test the optimum conditions required for a validation system for low-skilled, migrants and refugees within their particular context.

About the VISKA evaluation

The VISKA evaluation had three main aims. The first was to inform the system; process development of validation for the target groups informed by existing processes. The second was on stakeholder involvement; an evaluation of the impact on all stakeholders involved in validation. The third aim centred on policy development: which was to provide evidence to inform and influence future policy development in the field of validation of adult learning.

Four research questions underpinned the VISKA project 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 outcomes?**

This was a mixed methods evaluation. Data was gathered via a range of quantitative and qualitative methods including; candidate monitoring data, satisfaction survey, exit survey; qualitative interviews with candidates, front line staff, guidance counsellors; policy actors and influencers; focus groups with policy actors and influencers; national advisory groups which incorporated policy makers/ influencers and practitioners. The collection of candidates' monitoring and satisfaction results were conducted in Spring 2019 and Autumn 2019.

Programme Candidates

The VISKA field trials were targeted at low-skilled, migrants and refugees who were seen as potentially benefitting from a validation process which would enable them to meet the requirements of the workplace or educational standards in their respective countries. A limited trial of the EU Skills Profile Tool for Third country Nationals took place in Ireland and Iceland. In general, the validation candidates in each country were as follows:

Norway: refugees located in the integration centres of five counties

Iceland: migrants from Poland with competence in trade areas seeking further education and employment opportunities

Belgium Flanders: low-skilled adults including a substantial proportion of early school leavers

Ireland: low-skilled, migrants and refugees

Within some partner countries, the eventual programme candidates varied from those who had been expected to participate.

A total of 1173 validation candidates were reached by the VISKA process across the four countries: 612 in Norway, 51 in Iceland, 474 in Flanders and 32 in Ireland. This distribution is indicative of the target group population, the national context and access to the target groups.

The candidates were not a homogenous group in the national setting or within the profile classification of low-skilled, migrant or refugee. The exception to this was in Flanders where the profiles of the candidates were similar in terms of 66% being under the age of 26 and that 100% were not in possession of a recognised high school diploma. Broadly the educational attainment levels were higher than expected in the migrant and refugee groups.

Generally speaking, VISKA candidates could be divided into three broad groups reflecting their starting point and also their needs;

1. Low-skilled, early school leaver re-entering formal education to gain a high school diploma to enable further employment and educational opportunities. Exemption tests were the validation mechanism which was available to this group.
2. Migrant and refugee with low or non-existent academic qualifications but extensive transversal and 'other' skills. Low to medium language proficiency of current resident country. Residency status varied amongst the participant group.

3. Migrant and refugee with medium to high academic qualifications and extensive workplace experience and skills. Low to medium language proficiency of current resident country. Residency status varied amongst the participant group.

The readiness of candidates to engage was less in groups two and three due to circumstances which were outside of their direct control.

The VISKA Validation process

Although each VISKA partner country sought to develop the validation process best aligned to the needs of the candidates and within the broader national context in which it would operate, a number of common principles and practices could be identified.

On the whole, the validation processes sought to;

- provide a system which addressed the stages of validation as outlined in the EU Council Recommendation 2012 on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal learning;
- place the learner at the centre;
- focus on employment and education opportunities;
- empower the candidate to realise the extent of existing knowledge, skill and competence and the autonomy to determine the next steps which they would be interested in pursuing;
- help candidates to understand the national context of education, employment and society where necessary.

In Flanders, the target group had already identified the path which they were intending to pursue in advance of any validation arrangement. In the Irish context, the learner group were consulted in the context of only one of the intervention elements and not as part of a broader validation process. In Iceland the target group was predefined. Polish migrants, representing specific occupations or condition. The reason for choosing this group is that people born in Poland are the most numerous groups of immigrants in Iceland, a total of 13795 individuals that originate from Poland, 45,6% of the total immigration population Iceland in 2017.

Findings: intervention strategies

There is limited extant literature on action research in the context of building effective validation systems and processes as underpinned by policy. A priority for the VISKA project consortium and the evaluation process was to identify a model of validation which would inform future national and European policy and practice development in this space.

The national contexts in terms of support, openness to validation, existing and required infrastructure and preparedness context to respond effectively to the needs of the low-skilled, migrants and refugees had significant influence on the success of validation in terms of process and outcomes.

Developing and extending networks and partnerships

In the course of the project the networks and partnerships developed were multi-layered and varied considerably within the different national contexts. While there were variances across the project some common benefits from the efforts to develop and extend partnership could be seen including;

- Increased collaboration and awareness with regard to the target group and their needs.
- Increased awareness about validation and the requirements in developing an effective system underpinned by quality assurance.
- Vertical and horizontal networking and learning within the national systems, policy, more effectively informed by practice.
- Opportunity to provide holistic systems and policies for migrants, refugees and low-skilled which were cross-sectoral and cross-organisational.

Overall, the VISKA project was very successful in building and extending networks and partnerships within and across policy makers and influencers, social partners, education providers, front-line staff, guidance and support services for the candidates. The key contextual factor for this success was the willingness of people to engage and learn about the needs of the candidates and to consider how the current environment could be changed and improved. There was some scepticism within some national contexts at the beginning of the process as to the value that networking and partnerships could provide, this view diminished significantly by the end of the VISKA project.

It was acknowledged that the VISKA project contributed to operational practice of guidance and front-line staff in working with the candidates within their own context. It also contributed to the realisation that providing a validation system and process for this target group requires a much broader consideration of the services required pre and post validation as well as specific enablers such as specialised language exemptions during validation.

Significant time and effort were spent identifying those who should be included in the various networks but also in determining the optimum format and number of networks to ensure cross-sectoral/organisational learning and contribution. For example, in Norway, the VISKA project encompassed the formation of some new networks but also collaboration with existing ones. This was an effective way of ensuring the impact of the project nationally and contributed to enhanced partnerships with the existing relevant stakeholders within each national context who had direct influence on the validation process. To cultivate an inclusive system for validation, membership of networks and partnerships were strongly influenced by the needs of the specific candidates. In Iceland

an additional advisory group was established linking directly to employer and employee associations giving greater access into companies.

The VISKA project was very successful in developing and extending networks and partnerships during its lifetime, some of which will continue in similar or amended guises going forward in each of the national contexts. In Norway, Iceland and Flanders specific policies or strategies requiring amendments were identified and the amendments were informed by the validation processes and interventions of the VISKA project field trials.

Validation tools and Quality Assurance

Overall, the team were successful in using validation tools to identify and document the knowledge, skills and competence of low-skilled, migrants and refugees.

The experimentation with tools took a number of forms:

- Existing validation tools were used;
- Existing validation tools were adapted for the target groups which included translation;
- Electronic self-assessment and self-registration tools were used to capture the prior learning of the candidates;
- Guidance and front-line staff acquired the necessary competence to work effectively with the tools.

Challenges were identified with tools completed independently as it became clear that candidates required additional guidance and support in completing self-assessment and self-registration tools. The reasons for this varied from language competence, to reflection on and self-awareness of existing knowledge, skills and competence.

Key findings regarding tools and quality assurance

1. Candidates need to be clearly briefed as to the purpose of the tool used to capture their prior learning, this includes managing expectations;
2. Using data monitoring tools to capture the profile of the candidate helps to inform the system as to the potential capacity and needs of the individual which can then be more effectively supported;
3. Validation tools should be integrated into the validation systems and processes;
4. Guidance and front-line staff must be briefed to ensure consistency in the use of the tool with the candidate;
5. Adaptation or use of existing tools is sufficient to effectively capture prior learning of low-skilled, migrants and refugees;

6. Information stemming from the tool may need to be shared within and across services and a system found to enable a seamless process adhering to general personal data protection standards;
7. Selection of the most appropriate tool should be informed by the purpose of the validation process;
8. Advance consideration and planning are required when a qualified interpreter is included in the process so as to limit confusion and misinterpretation.

Documentation and assessment of transversal skills

Documents D1.1 and D3.2 regarding transversal skills were developed by the project partners. This provided some perspectives on the vocabulary used and a general framework of potential skills which low-skilled, migrants and refugees might have and for which they might seek validation. Transversal skills⁵ are those which have been identified as being desirable for an employee to possess within the workplace. In three of the partner countries transversal skills are embedded within the formal education and training systems and are captured within the context of a particular subject, module or programme. In Iceland, transversal skills can be assessed independently. As with any transversal skills, they are context specific, so the acquisition of knowledge, skill and competence will be strongly influenced by the context in which they have been gained – although they in many cases are highly transferable.

While all country partners contributed to the general considerations and the development of assessment criteria, this intervention in relation to transversal skills was only conducted in Iceland where five out of over 20 standards, identified and described by the partnership, were used in a validation process with a small group of candidates. The standards used were chosen based on which were considered most relevant for the particular candidate group.

One of the key reflections arising from the documentation and assessment of transversal skills within validation is that it needs an additional skill set of the candidate to become introspective and to reflect on their own transversal skills and to identify how they could be applicable within a broader context. A role of front-line staff and guidance professionals within validation processes in TS skills is to provide

⁵ it was decided to adopt a view of Transversal Skills such as that put forward by UNESCO (*Bangkok*) 2014, *Asia Pacific: Transversal Skills are those typically considered as not specifically related to a particular job, task, academic discipline or area of knowledge but as skills that can be used in a wide variety of situations and work settings (IBE 2013). These skills are increasingly in high demand for learners to successfully adapt to changes and to lead meaningful and productive lives.*

guidance on how this can be achieved and in what ways prior learning should be identified, documented and evidenced in order for it to become measurable for validation.

Training and capacity building of front-line and guidance staff

In VISKA, the profile of staff who worked with the candidates was context specific and strongly influenced by existing processes and infrastructure. Validation training for staff interacting with these learners had already been conducted in Iceland and Norway prior to the project interventions so the additional training focused predominantly on working with Interpreters who were a new aspect of the existing processes, and multicultural competences. More general training was also made available to staff who may not have worked in validation previously. It was found to be very beneficial to those who did engage with training to familiarise themselves with the process of validation and the steps involved.

Responsibility for training and capacity building varied across the VISKA partners and the nature of the partners in terms of the influence they might have on existing or future training activities also varied significantly. An outline training module was proposed under VISKA which encompassed skills staff should have as validation practitioners. It was considered fundamental by the partners that staff should be able to;

- Clearly describe the validation process and main principles underpinning validation of non-formal and informal learning as presented in the EU guidelines;
- Describe effective validation methods and the quality measures applicable to validation processes;
- Identify diverse ways of assessing skills;
- Identify multicultural competences underlying services for various target groups (including migrants);
- Explain the interpreters' role and tasks

In terms of continuing professional development, in Ireland it was suggested that training was required at three levels, at an introductory familiarisation level to the concept of validation, in the mentoring and support of a candidate seeking validation and in the assessment of prior learning. As previously mentioned, working with an interpreter was identified in Norway and Iceland as an additional training requirement within their national contexts. Training is outside the remit of the project partner (DET) in Flanders but in broad discussions staff were supportive of the idea of training on validation.

Candidates were found to be generally satisfied with the professionalism of the validation processes which they experience, however, some mentioned dissatisfaction with the outcome of the validation process regarding future pathways and opportunities available to them or the skills captured by the process. Managing expectations of any candidate group by staff engaged with validation has been identified as an additional training element which should be considered.

Access and awareness

National awareness of validation varied considerably across the VISKA participant countries prior to the interventions, influenced by existing national systems, processes and the extant legal and regulatory framework. There was also variation in awareness of validation within organisations who were member of VISKA networks and partnerships and also in the candidate population. In Norway and Iceland, there is a legal basis for a citizen to get formal validation for their learning. In Flanders, there is established practice; however, participation by Centres of Adult Education is only regulated at local level. For the validation of professional competences a legal framework has been established recently. In Ireland, significant practices have incorporated validation however, familiarity with the concept of validation is still low.

The establishment of the National Advisory Groups and other networks increased the awareness amongst professional staff and enhanced the discourse surrounding validation within each national context. Synergies for further development were identified beyond the VISKA project framework.

Access to information and awareness of validation services and support amongst the candidates reached by VISKA could be divided into two distinct groupings. In Flanders the priority was making access to consistent validation information and processes possible for those pursuing their high school diploma. In Norway and Iceland, the target groups can be considered as marginalised and lacking in access to central national validation services and considerable effort had to be made to engage with them for the purposes of the VISKA project.

Some key messages regarding this

- Early intervention with refugees on national systems, structures, education and the workplace are important in the integration process. Validation or more specifically the first two stages of validation - identification and documentation are beneficial for new entrants to a country to empower them as they seek potential opportunities.
- Consideration must be given as to the language of materials circulated to ensure their accessibility by candidates. In Iceland and Norway, information was provided in the mother tongue or English. Translation of existing materials requires care and sensitivity as some words have alternative meanings in different contexts.

- Reaching the target group was extremely challenging in Iceland despite extensive promotional activities. The reasons for the lack of engagement with validation processes by low-skilled, migrants and refugees with national services can be complex and difficult to resolve.

Findings: candidate outcomes

Information, support, and a collaborative system were key to positive candidate outcomes. The guidance and support received by the candidates across the project field trials was a positive experience for all. The identification and documentation phases of validation were the starting point for many in seeking and pursuing further opportunities. Front-line staff and guidance counsellors worked well with interpreters in most cases which enhanced the experience for the learner. The professional skills of the interpreter and their familiarity with technical language of specific sectors was identified as being a challenge in Norway and Iceland which highlights the importance of the skillset of those engaged in a support function within a validation process.

In total under the VISKA project, prior learning was captured by 32 candidates in Ireland in the testing of the EU Skills Profiling tool, and for 1425⁶ successful applications against specified standards of modules, trade standards and learning outcomes in Norway, Iceland and Flanders.

In addition to the granting of exemptions within further study or in meeting workplace standards, the benefits of the validation process had far reaching consequences beyond an assessment process. Candidates were more aware of their learning and its relevance separate from the context in which it was gained. In the Norwegian context, validation was an opportunity to make visible the extent of the candidates' prior learning, both to themselves and also to reception centre staff. This meant that potential pathways could be identified earlier. This could contribute to more effective and efficient integration into Norwegian society, ensuring that society could benefit more immediately from the skills which refugees bring with them.

Across the project partnership it was evident that validation for low-skilled, migrants and refugees is only one part of a much larger system. Participation in the process raised expectations and ambitions which could not be realised after validation by some candidates due to policy restrictions relating to language and residency status. Validation marked the beginning of the journey in pursuit of formal qualifications or employment opportunities and societal integration. This raises an important recommendation for future development of validation within any national context, it needs to be

⁶ This number refers to the total number of applications for validation in the field trials of VISKA. Multiple applications were made by some candidates.

embedded, supported and aligned with the opportunities it can present to be fully realised. In any system careful consideration should be given to the pre and post validation phases for candidates.

Implications for future programme and policy development

The key programme and policy messages emerging from the VISKA evaluation are focused on two areas:

- 1) influence of organisations, national priorities, societal norms and economic drivers on validation
- 2) influence of candidate groups on validation

Influence of organisations, national priorities, societal norms and economic drivers on validation

In the VISKA project, the development and extension of networks were hugely beneficial in informing the process implemented in each national context and in identifying potential policy amendments or additions to support the validation of prior learning of low-skilled, migrants and refugees. The composition of the networks and national advisory groups were instrumental in enabling success and influencing change. The national standing of participant organisations, (which was high among the VISKA partnership) influenced the opportunity of validation for the candidates as the organisations had established connections with the required support services and resources for validation. As was evident within the VISKA project the national priority to engage more with specific target groups motivated a solutions-based approach to validation for the low-skilled, migrant and refugee. Challenges emerged in the future steps following validation except for the Flemish intervention. Societal norms of language, qualification or workplace standard for further progression in the national systems emerged as key challenges within Norway, Iceland and Ireland. The residency status in Norway was identified as a gatekeeper to further opportunities. The willingness to work towards solutions to overcome barriers where candidates have identified opportunities and progression routes is related to the existing economic drivers which influence policy in each national context. These economic drivers, it should be noted, change over time. It could therefore be argued that culture within a country is significant as it impacts the impetus for change.

Through the VISKA field trials and interventions, two laws, one parliamentary resolution, two regulations, one strategy and one decree were identified as requiring amendments to further support validation for low-skilled, migrants and refugees. These findings demonstrate the complexity of validation practice and policy within national systems. Contributing to the European agenda surrounding validation, the project has highlighted the need for greater collaboration, consultation and consideration in policy development which enables the access to and mobility of learners in

education and employment which is central to the European agendas of mobility, lifelong learning and diminishing skills mismatch and in developing a strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

Influence of candidate groups on validation

Validation programmes and policies should place the learner at the centre so their needs and readiness to engage are considered. Validation is an individual process where the unique knowledge, skill and competence is explored. This has resource implications as the learner is a contributor to the process and requires appropriate and sufficient support. The support and guidance provided within VISKA to the candidate group was extensive, especially for migrants and refugees. Familiarity with national systems and the purpose of the process which they were entering required time to process. Validation is extremely heterogeneous and this challenges rigid systems. The task within any validation system is to be flexible enough to accommodate diverse individuals without compromising quality assurance.

In general, the challenge in VISKA for migrants and refugees was the lack of familiarity with the national systems and lack of awareness of further education and employment opportunities. The challenge for low-skilled was in making a more informed decision as to the qualification or employment being sought, this could reduce the drop-out rate from second chance education. Validation targeted at the low-skilled, migrant and refugee could help member states reduce the skill gaps and mismatches if validation is effectively integrated into broader education and workplace systems.

To fully realise the potential of validation adequate sustainable funding is required within national systems, in the front-line and support functions.

Introduction

The ‘Visible Skills of Adults’ Project (VISKA) is a collaboration between four partner countries: Belgium Flanders, Norway, Iceland and Ireland. Project VISKA 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. VISKA 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 VISKA project is Cork Institute of Technology, Ireland.

This report presents the synthesis of findings for the VISKA project based on national report from the field trials. (Annex 1 - 4).

The VISKA project

The Visible Skills of Adults (VISKA) 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 aimed 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, the VISKA project addressed the need to make the skills of low-skilled adults, migrants⁷, asylum seekers⁸ and refugees⁹ 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 VISKA project team implemented and evaluated 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 were developed and agreed with a view to making the knowledge, skills

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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)

and competence of migrants, asylum seekers, refugees and adults with low skills¹⁰ levels, more visible. While there are differences across the participating countries in relation to validation policies, practices and infrastructures; the focus of the project team was to learn how the chosen interventions, when enacted, could 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 were 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 was that, through developing, trialling and evaluating these interventions:

1. The **processes** to implement effective validation services, supporting networks and staff development will be mapped.

¹⁰ 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

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.

Research and evaluation

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

The evaluation focused 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 included 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 the partner countries data collection and analysis was conducted by the respective partners of the VISKA project and their associated appointed research partners, based on a data collection workshop and ongoing supports offered by the research and evaluation partners.

VISKA project in the VISKA partner countries

Validation at a European level varies significantly from one country to another, as is evident in the European Inventory of Validation¹¹. The primary influence on this is the political, economic and social context of the country in question and the readiness of the system to embrace and integrate validation. It is for that reason that the starting point of each partner country varied and the mechanisms and approaches used were strongly influenced by the national context.

Introduction to the project partners

Skills **Norway**, the lead partner of the VISKA project, is the Directorate for Lifelong Learning under the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research. In addition to national responsibility for recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning, Skills Norway promotes access to and participation in formal, non-formal and informal adult education and supports quality development of validation processes.

The VISKA partners in **Iceland** are IDAN fræðslusetur Education Centre and The Education and Training Service Centre (ETSC), both operating as a delegated body for the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (MESC) in the VISKA project.

IDAN is a non-profit education and training provider for professionals in regulated trades. IDAN is supported by the Federation of Employees and Trade Unions in respective trades. IDAN has an agreement with the MESC to administrate apprenticeship contracts and journeyman's examinations as well as recognition of foreign qualifications and work experience and finally a contractual agreement with ETSC in providing Validation Services for regulated crafts and trades in Iceland.

ETSC is owned by the social partners in Iceland and has a tripartite agreement with the MESC on tasks in adult education including coordinating a national strategy on validation of prior learning on Upper Secondary School level education for people with little formal education. ETSC operates in accordance with a service contract with MESC and administers the Education and Training fund for adult education. The main responsibility of the ETSC is to make curricula for adult education, develop a national strategy for validation of prior learning, increase quality in Adult Education and develop counselling and guidance services.

In **Belgium Flanders** the project partner is the Department of Education and Training (DET) in Flanders, part of the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training and responsible for policy preparation, support and evaluation. In advance of addressing the subject of validation, it is important to outline the

¹¹ The European Inventory of Validation is a regularly updated review of validation of informal and non-formal learning in Europe. Available at: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory>

Belgian political situation. Belgium is a federal state consisting out of three communities and three regions. The communities are responsible for “matters related to the individual”, such as culture, education, welfare, health, sports and language. In Belgium, these communities are the Flemish community, the French community and the German-speaking community. The regions are responsible for “matters related to the territory”, such as the environment, environmental planning, housing, mobility, infrastructure, work and the economy. The three regions in Belgium are the Flemish region, the Walloon region and the Brussels region. The other public domains fall under the responsibility of the federal Belgian government. For the purpose of this document, the Flemish region and the Flemish community will be referred to as Flanders. Furthermore, the contents of this document can only be considered applicable to Flanders, unless stated otherwise.

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 is evident from the brief descriptions above, there is variation in the role and responsibilities of each of the partner organisations within the VISKA project including in the direct influence they have on national validation arrangements. In terms of legislation it is important to state that currently there is no legislation within the national contexts that support the direct focus or aim of VISKA. Legislation may exist for other learners or for other contexts however no national legislation supports the national implementation of validation for the cohorts identified by the VISKA project partners.

Aim of the project

The aim of the VISKA project as outlined in the original application was to address the European policy priority of diminishing skills mismatch, fostering employability, economic growth and job creation, and social inclusion – by making knowledge, skills and competences of adults more visible through validation of informal and non-formal learning. The target groups of the VISKA project were focused on migrants, refugees and low-skilled. Each partner country identified the specific target group(s) which they intended to work with during the term of the project.

The extent of the European policy priority varied amongst the project partners due to the national contexts and changing national economic climates. Opportunities identified at the outset of the project in terms of target audiences or economic motivations shifted over the lifetime of the VISKA project which presented challenges to the project partners. These are discussed in more detail in the national reports but will be summarised where applicable in this report.

Summarising the aim of the VISKA project in each of the partner countries;

In **Norway** the aim was to develop more efficient integration processes where immigrants with prior learning relevant for the Norwegian labour market could get their skills validated by the formal education system and use this recognition as a starting point for further professional development. Validation of non-formal and informal learning is possible at all levels of education and training in Norway and can be used to acquire exemptions from modules and/or full qualifications. There are laws and regulations in place relating to each level of education and training, providing a general framework for validation of prior learning.¹²

From a national point of view, validation of prior learning is considered as one of several useful tools in the effort of supporting competence development among adults in need of a more secure standing in the labour market. In the recently developed Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy (2017-2021), validation is mentioned as one of the important tools in competence development, as it provides an opportunity for employees to have their work-based learning validated towards national curricula. However, the focus in the Strategy is not on newly arrived refugees specifically, but more widely on adults in need of up- or re-skilling.

The VISKA project participants in Norway were refugees seeking asylum or in the process of being granted asylum and residence in Norway.

In **Iceland**, the focus was on the parity of standing and opportunity regarding education, and on having immigrants' experience properly evaluated. Currently in Iceland at the national level there are no organised validation arrangements (practice) for migrants in place. Validation opportunities are available for all individuals with little or low levels of qualifications free of charge. However, access and the process of validation services for non-Icelandic speaking individuals is an onerous task with the added difficulty that the formal system has no specific educational offerings for non-Icelandic individuals who would like to complete their qualifications after the validation process. The target group for the Icelandic VISKA trails were immigrants.

In **Flanders**, participation in the project was intended to enable the team to inform the Minister of Education and the Flemish government about the usefulness and the possibilities of providing an accessible validation of prior learning (VPL) procedure in the general education programmes in the centres of adult education (CAEs) in Flanders, tailored to the needs of the target group.

¹² see the 2010 update of the European Inventory for a comprehensive overview of the laws and strategies which have been introduced over time

The aim of the VISKA project interventions in Flanders is to draw more attention to the importance of general education and a general educational qualification¹³. The target group for the field trials consisted of low-skilled adults 18 years or older with Belgian nationality (or can prove their legal residence in Belgium). In 2016, 28,2% of the Belgian population between 15 and 64 years was low-skilled.

In **Ireland**, QQI operates as a delegated body of the Department of Education and Skills in Ireland and their participation was with a view to disseminate useful and practical information on VISKA approaches and good practice relating to the recognition of prior learning of adults, and to facilitate efforts to develop a national policy.

The VISKA target learner cohort in Ireland focused on people with low skills/qualifications, including migrants and refugees. The primary cohort to be addressed was people with low levels of qualifications and skills, but with the acknowledgement from the outset that low levels of qualification did not necessarily signal low skill level nor vice versa.

In general, and in reference to the European policy agenda the focus of VISKA in Norway, Iceland, Flanders and Ireland was on entry to, or the continuance of, education with the intention of securing employment comparable to skills which could be validated.

The VISKA project and field trials were centred on five interventions, which sought qualitative improvement in current validation policies and practices. It was acknowledged from the beginning that implementation of the interventions and field trials would differ depending on the local/environmental/economic context of each of the partner countries. The contributions of partners to the deliverables of the project where more general reflections and support could be given did not always result from engagement with the interventions and field trials.

About this report

This report aims to reflect the totality of work undertaken within each of the partner countries and the collective learning which was gained from undertaking such research on validation across the consortium. This considered collation of the experience and reflections of the partners will inform other countries of opportunities and challenges associated with validation thereby contributing to the policies and practices.

¹³ In Flanders an 'educational qualification' in adult education is the combination of a professional qualification with a certification AGE. This combination leads to a diploma of secondary education. A vocational qualification describes the knowledge and skills an individual needs to exercise a profession. An educational qualification gives an overview of the knowledge and skills an individual needs to start further studies, to participate in society or to exercise a specific profession. **In this report the term educational qualification only signifies VPL for additional general education.**

Methodology

This section summarises the research and evaluation methodology and how the evaluation protocol was implemented in each participating country. The methodology was 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 included 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 validation of prior learning
- The project partners in each country had varying roles and responsibilities in relation to validation of prior learning.
- Partners selected the interventions in which they participated and which they judged relevant for their organisations and their context
- The project resources were limited and were rightly focused on the implementation of the interventions and the identification of transferable policy implications rather than on 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 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 project.

A (modified) **Realistic Evaluation** approach was adopted which allowed the contexts for the interventions enacted under the project to form a real background to the interpretation of the findings and the project focused on the collection of rich information around the practice setting which contributed to the later extraction of value in the policy domain by the project partners themselves as the experts within their contexts. This interplay between the contexts and the actions came to the fore throughout the project. As propounded by Pawson and Tilley¹⁴ – the question in Realistic Evaluations is: *What works, for whom and in what circumstances?* Generally, a realistic 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 Realistic 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 included collection of both qualitative and quantitative data sets. Realistic 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 were embedded in the social reality of their particular context and that influenced how each intervention was implemented and how actors responded to it (or not). The project partnership adopted an open and collaborative approach which recognises the project partners as experts within their own context and practice setting. To ensure the work was completed in an efficient and cost effective manner CIT 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 was 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

¹⁴ Pawson, R., & Tilley, N. (1997). *Realistic Evaluation*. Sage.

policy experimentation projects has also been leveraged to ensure efficient transfer of knowledge and practice.

Collection of Data for the Project

The interventions in the project proposal were phrased in very general terms and the project team worked to find common activities that were the basis for the collection of comparable data arising from the varied field trials that were 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 validation of prior learning, while keeping to the fore the requirement to make a policy contribution at a local, national and European level. This 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.

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 Realist Evaluation Process. Data related to these specifics was decided upon and gathered locally and interpreted in the context of the local situation and reported on in the National Reports.

The target groups for the field trials were not generally comparable enough at each location to allow statistically significant conclusions to be drawn across the project. It was also recognised that the field trial participants were 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 was generally in line with the aims of the participant country at the time of the project proposal or implementation. However, the findings and conclusions of the project were 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 worked with adult learners who for one reason or another were able to benefit from opportunities to have their learning recognised and validated and these experiences provided opportunities to develop valuable transferable learning for others.

Together the project partners, informed by their expertise on their particular contexts, considered what information can be collected, from whom and at which stage in the project. As detailed in the Proposal the project essentially had 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.

A number of important sources of data and information were identified before, during and after the project activities. These sources included:

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

1. 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 included 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 allow the project partners to ascertain areas in need of development in each country context which could be addressed through VISKA.

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 included: 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 participants 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 synthesis of the information collected by partners and the broader policy recommendations which can be concluded from the outcomes of the five interventions and field trials.

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. The commonality of focus was on developing policy recommendations which would enable validation for low-skilled, migrants and refugees.

2. Analysis and Evaluation- collective consideration of policy impacts

Qualitative data from the various focus groups and interviews have been 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 are 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 in order to ensure a robust and reliable output.

3. Interim Results

A cross country synthesis interim report was published in May 2019.¹⁵ A key aim of the interim report D5.1 was to analyse and share early reflections in order to inform future validation development. The findings of the interim report D5.1 are integrated into this final report and reflected in the National Implementation and Evaluation Reports.

Research methodology across VISKA

Participant Sample

The participant sample within each of the three field trial partner countries varied significantly in terms of learner group characteristics and the numbers engaged in the empirical research of the VISKA project. It did however reflect the diversity of adult learners with appropriate prior learning seeking validation. The focus of the VISKA project is on low-skilled, migrants and refugees and each field trial partner selected one or more of these groups to collaborate with. In terms of the low-skilled it could be argued that this learner group is also of relevance to describe both migrants and refugees.

¹⁵ Interim key findings are available on <https://viskaproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/D5.1-Final-document.pdf>

The table below outlines the participant sample size within each country by activity. The profile of the participants varied across the partner countries. The intentions of VISKA, due to the nature of the target audience and the focus of the project in making adult learning skills visible was not that samples would be representative of a greater population. The interventions focused on establishing a systematic integrated process for working with adult learners seeking validation. An exception to this was in Flanders where the focus was on AGE and on CAE which attract large numbers of participants every year.

The profile of the learner in the case of Flanders have some degree of similarity which yielded results that could be argued to be representative of those who engage with those services nationally. It could not however be determined that the findings would be representative of adult education in other EU countries.

In each country the National Advisory Group was formed by the project partners. The make up of the group varied and was appropriate to each context. Generally, the group was made up of representatives of organisations who could be considered stakeholders in the validation process and those who were in a position to make or influence policy.

The project team used the term Front line staff to encompass a range of those who are in a position to reach the potential validation participants on an individual or group basis. The make up of this group varied from context to context. In some cases, it included those who are trained guidance professionals. In other cases. it included staff with other functions who were also in a position to offer advice on education or career opportunities

<u>Country</u>	<u>Participant type</u>	<u>Number(s)</u>
Iceland	Learner	51
	Front Line Staff	7
	Policy Makers	12
Norway	Learner (Identification, Documentation/Assessment, Certification)	612 /74
	Front Line Staff	21/29
	Policy Makers	5
Flanders	Learner	474
	Directors, counsellors and coordinators of CAES	36

	Teachers of MACUSA	6
	Policy Makers	14
Ireland	Learner	32
	Front Line Staff	10
	Policy Makers/ Influencers	15

Data collection

Common data collection methods and questions were established early in the project by the project partners and the research and evaluation partner. It was at that early stage that the purpose and focus of VISKA was extensively discussed and the parameters of the study were established. The data collection arrangements were locally developed and managed, however where possible consistency was assured using the research protocols document.

Quantitative data

The methodologies for identifying, collating and analysing the quantitative data obtained from the various target audiences varied across the VISKA project. This was due in part to the familiarity of the partners with particular software and statistical analysis but was also heavily influenced by the scale of the participant sample. As was the case in Flanders the scale of the participant sample was such that comparable analysis could be confidently deployed using a statistical package and the research presented an additional opportunity to obtain rich data which had national relevance to the development of validation arrangements.

Qualitative data

In addition to the quantitative data obtained in VISKA, richer qualitative data was also obtained from the various stakeholder groups through interviews, surveys and focus groups. This provided the opportunity to gain a deeper insight into the individual motivations, aspirations and concerns of those seeking validation, recognition and opportunity. In the case of Norway and Iceland interviews were sometimes challenging due to language barriers between the interviewer and interviewee.

Methodological challenges

All VISKA partners experienced some level of methodological challenges. These in general related to language barriers, the effect of social desirability and the changing profile of the target group or environmental circumstances which required a re-think of approach. An over dependency on the goodwill of reception centre staff, or CAE staff was also identified as a challenge by partners of the VISKA project. There were additional challenges for mentors/ frontline and guidance staff who had

responsibility for familiarising the participants with national systems; this was challenging for those working with migrants and refugees.

Working with candidates who did not have competence in the language of the partner country was challenging and open to misinterpretation at times. Partners, through the VISKA trials were reminded of the sensitivity required in working with particular cohorts who may be vulnerable and whose prior experience of disclosing sensitive information influenced their willingness to participate and share.

Key methodological limitations

Findings of the VISKA field trials were dependent on the goodwill and participation of individuals and organisations outside the partnership, the motivation to participate varied considerably which challenged partners. The importance of having a professional interpreter service available was also highlighted as influencing findings and the accuracy and reliability of same.

The importance of infrastructure and the coordination of services enabling validation emerged as major influencers on the success of the process. This is one of the key recommendations for those proposing to test the same within their own jurisdiction.

Programme Participants and Stakeholders

In looking at the programme participants and stakeholders across the VISKA project the one common characteristic of participants was that they had some learning for which they were seeking validation. In the case of Norway, participants came from the five reception centres managed by the municipalities who provided guidance and counselling on the identification and documentation of prior learning. In the case of those who participated in the Icelandic field trials they were Polish nationals working in the trades with varying degrees of competence in Icelandic. The profile of participants in Flanders was 'low-skilled' defined as those having no Diploma of higher secondary education at Flemish NQF level 4. In Ireland, the participants for the field test of the EU skills profiling tool were migrants and refugees.

Guidance and counsellors were available to all candidates who partook in the VISKA field trials to provide clarification and support where necessary. The guidance support that was provided was determined by the local environment and context and informed by the focus of the VISKA project, Validation of Prior Learning.

As is outlined in the national reports and summarised here, some interesting findings emerged during the VISKA project on the target population and on the profile of same. Evidence of the changing profile of people in the Norwegian reception centres for example is depicted in the table produced by Skills Norway to compare those in 2018 versus Spring 2019.

What is evident is the impact that the change of profile of learner can make when planning a validation intervention.	Spring 2019	2018
All residents	304	534
Women	92	160
Men	212	373
Participants active in full-time program	164	195
Residents who have started or completed primary school, so far this year	45	170
Residents who have started or completed high school, so far this year	39	135
Residents with higher education, so far this year	196	183
Unskilled work	92	275
Skilled work based on teaching or training	33	57
Participants with completed competence mapping, so far this year	278	479
Participants with completed career counselling note, so far this year	213	399

Residents with competence information and individual plan transferred to Introductory programme	92	280
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Table 2 Data from Norwegian reception centres 2018 versus Spring 2019

The number of people who had completed higher education was highlighted by Skills Norway in their country report.

Completed HE	41
Upper secondary education	12
Some HE	7
Primary education	6
Some training	3
Completed training	3
Upper secondary education, 6 months add. Training	2
Upper secondary education, plus one year college	2
Upper secondary education, summerschool	1
Completed VET	2
Completed Tertiary Vocational Training	1
some schooling	1
None	1

Table 3 Education attainment levels amongst refugees in Norwegian trials

The educational profile of the candidates in Norway also had an impact on the subsequent stages of validation (assessment and certification). As can be seen in table 3, the majority of participants in the project had some higher education completed, hold an upper secondary education qualification or have completed higher education.

The approach adopted in Iceland was different in that the focus was on trade qualifications rather than on general education or academic accomplishments. The profile of learners was more gender balanced than in Norway which was more coincidental than planned. There were five main trade qualification areas identified namely in carpentry 23, painters (two), housekeepers/maids 7 (8),¹⁶ transversal skills program (six), and diet cooks 12. The majority have lived in Iceland for more than six years, however less than half speak Icelandic. The educational profile of the participants was very interesting, with those who participated in the survey indicating they had completed at least upper secondary school education with the exception of two of the participants.

The target group in Flanders were those who were early school leavers and were trying to obtain their secondary education diploma. It is important to emphasize that most of the unqualified graduates do not re-enter education (78,6%). This presents a significant challenge to the authorities but is beyond the specific focus of this research. For the VISKA field trials in Flanders 474 learners from seven

¹⁶ One learner/participant received full recognition of qualifications after 2nd stage of the VPL process

different CAEs were considered. All 474 candidates were adults who did not acquire a diploma of secondary education and wanted to enrol in the course of AGE, which is preceded by a validation process. Some of the candidates obtained their diploma abroad, but it is most likely that these diplomas have not been acknowledged in Flanders. Exemption tests are available for most subjects with the exception of MACUSA.

Adults learners can enter the course of AGE without participating in the validation process (while refusing the exemption tests). From the 806 learners who completed the survey 661 participated in the validation process. When we only look at the centres who participated in the field trials, 294 of the learners surveyed were registered in one of the participating centres and 238 of them participated in the validation process.

Obtaining the Diploma of secondary education, further education and increasing their chances on the labour market are the main reasons cited by the participants in Flanders for engaging with a validation process.

Programme staff

A broad group of staff have been involved in Norwegian trials in VISKA as they have had different roles in supporting the potential VISKA candidates in the five Integration Reception Centres located in five different counties throughout the country. Career counsellors, assessors from the county upper secondary schools or adult learning centres, supported by administrative staff were among those who formed part of the validation system for VISKA in Norway. The final certification has been the responsibility of administrative staff in the providing school or centre.

In Iceland staff who have been involved in the trials have included those in IDAN, linked with the trade areas, guidance and relevant assessors of the various discipline areas. The programme staff, the VISKA team worked with in Flanders, consisted mainly of the (adjunct) directors and /or the coordinator of the course of AGE of the participating centres.

The programme staff involved in the Irish tools trial were programme staff who worked with the migrant and refugee group in the local context.

In reflecting on what programme staff need to be involved in validation arrangements, it was apparent that the profile was informed by the environmental context of where the learner was located and the relevant staff who were part of the system. This varied across the partner countries of VISKA. The approach that was taken across the project was to embed the validation practice within the existing framework. This was beneficial in terms of providing an equitable approach for all learners and in building on the extensive work already developed.

The addition, in Norway and Iceland an interpreter was integrated into the existing systems and networks to enable more effective communication between programme staff and the candidate. Integrating and effectively working with a new support was challenging for staff who had no previous experience.

Key findings

The experiences of the programme participants and various stakeholders across the partner countries evolved over the lifetime of the VISKA project. This is evident in D2.1 and D5.1 where stakeholders were sceptical as to how successful the process was going to be or how realistic it was in terms of enabling programme participants to engage in validation, for it to be integrated within the existing systems and for there to be positive outcomes. In some instances, engagement was at local, regional and national levels. The composition of the network of stakeholders was not identical across partner countries but informed by the existing system framework. This was also the case in using interpreters or with working with the very well-established CAEs as in Flanders.

Assessors were satisfied that they were able to make the prior learning of candidates visible and that visibility related to different curricula or standards in the different countries. Satisfaction of the learners of the visibility of the totality of their skills varied within systems and across systems. It could be argued that this depended on whether the holistic skills of the candidate were being captured or developed against specified criteria. The availability of pathways beyond the validation process also influenced the satisfaction of candidates across VISKA.

Aside from all the positive feedback, there were also challenges due the complexity of the existing systems and the number of actors involved. This resulted in systems which were time-consuming and resource demanding. Communication challenges as a result of lack of openness or complexity due to the use of translators were cited as hindering progress in some national contexts.

Key Implications

The importance of the concept of validation being introduced at the early stages of integration has been highlighted as being significantly beneficial to the adult immigrant in Norway. The sooner the immigrant is informed of the system of the country in which they find themselves in the more beneficial it is for them as a future citizen. Recent development in national skills policy in Norway is aimed at making adult learning more flexible. The existing programmes are revised, and new programmes are piloted to create faster and more flexible pathways for immigrants and adults with little education.

In Norway and Iceland, professional staff involved in VISKA trials have been introduced to working with interpreters. They have experienced that this works well as a means to understand the

competences of the candidates and thus, make better plans for their further competence development. They have also experienced that it is challenging for interpreters to work with professional vocabulary from the various curricula involved in the assessment procedure. However, giving the interpreter some extra time to study the curricula has proved to be effective.

In Iceland, what was uncovered during the VISKA trials was that there could potentially be a much larger group of immigrants who could benefit from validation as those who did part-take were living in Iceland for an extended period of time so potentially there could be those who have arrived more recently.

In Norway and Iceland, the educational profile of the refugee and migrant was much higher than anticipated. In Norway, this was due in part to the change of origin of refugee.

The system in Flanders differed from that in the other VISKA countries in terms of learner profile but it had similarities in terms of developing opportunities for learners to gain formal recognition for learning already acquired with the intention of improving education or workplace opportunities.

Implications for future validation development

In looking at the individual country findings and implications for future development. Recommendations were influenced by the national contexts, the existing and required systems for validation arrangements.

In the case of Norway, the VISKA trials indicate that early VPL may be useful for the right candidates. However, the candidate needs time to prepare for a successful VPL process. It is important to be aware of the possibility that for some candidates, it might be too early in their trajectory to start a validation process. In the Norwegian case involvement of stakeholders at all levels is important, preferably early in the process to make sure that the system around the candidate works without sectoral obstacles. One should keep in mind that processes like this are resource intensive.

In Iceland, lessons learnt from VISKA need to be considered in policy targeted at migrants.

In Flanders, knowing your target group well is important when developing a validation programme. This can be achieved through an extensive profile description of the target group.

The needs and ability of candidates should inform the system development process. This is particularly relevant for those who need more support and personal guidance, an accessible small-scale system is needed. For candidates who are more autonomous and can proceed independently, a larger or more impersonal system can work well. In Flanders, with the Centres for Adult Education at

the one hand and the Examination Board of Secondary Education at the other, both systems can work to achieve these aims.

In the Irish context validation has been developing through concurrent national projects identifying needs similar to those outlined in Flanders, but also through the field trials; the needs of refugees in Ireland need consideration as their particular requirements have not influenced many VPL services to date at the national level.

As is evident, implications for future development are aligned very strongly with the national contexts but one common thread is the need to provide adequate support for the learner seeking validation and giving due consideration to the readiness of the person to engage. This then influences the process and associated supports in their capacity to adequately respond.

Summary of implications for future validation development

Across all VISKA partner countries one common reflection was the requirement to know your target group. Flanders invested considerable time in profiling those who typically access and engage with AGE and CAE. This is also relevant in Norway and Iceland who worked with migrants and refugees; however, the population profile was less predictable and one key reflection was the target groups' readiness to engage with validation. Early intervention or familiarisation with the national system was seen as a positive recommendation from Norway. This was also commented on by Iceland. As with any validation system for any learner group the ability and readiness of a candidate to engage will vary considerably, which should inform the stakeholders of the system and process. This raises an important consideration at the European level that validation processes and systems should be developed to support and facilitate all learner groups but engagement with validation should be driven by the individual. Involvement of stakeholders at all levels early in the process is important, to ensure that the process around the candidate works without obstacles. The findings within each national context is that the process is resource intensive. As the study was not a longitudinal one, it is not possible to conclude whether the process can be simplified over time.

The importance of guidance within any validation system has been emphasised by all partners as being an essential element to engaging with the low-skilled, migrant and refugee and that the resulting success of many of the engagements with the learners was the self-empowerment and realisation of the diversity of skills, knowledge and competence that they possessed.

The VISKA Validation process

This chapter provides an overview of the VISKA 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.

Firstly, in looking at the current national systems;

In Norway, a validation system based on the agreed common principles has been under development for many years, as part of overarching lifelong learning policies. Validation is a long-standing topic of discussion also in tripartite cooperation, which is reflected in the Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy 2017–2021. VPL in Norway is only available in the formal education system, since the only standards for VPL today are the learning outcomes described in formal curricula and study programmes. There are laws and regulations in place relating to each level of education and training, providing a general framework for VPL. Initial vocational education and training (VET) is included in the formal education system at upper secondary level, and as such makes VPL available for all vocational education and training at this level.

In Norway today, validation toward learning outcomes in the curricula must be conducted through Norwegian or Sami languages. In the VISKA project trials, validation was conducted towards learning outcomes in Upper Secondary Education, including VET, using the candidate's own language or English. The five participating counties were given exemption from the language requirements regulation during the VISKA trial period.

During the VISKA trials, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training issued a proposal which amends the regulations to the Education Act governing validation of prior learning. If the proposal is approved, it will be possible for all candidates to go through the validation process in languages other than Norwegian and Sami (the national languages) in the future. The Norwegian trials in VISKA involved working with refugees who had arrived quite recently and did not yet have sufficient command of Norwegian or Sami.

A Norwegian government whitepaper emphasises that it is important to make sure immigrants' competence can be put quickly to use in working life in Norway, and that good qualification pathways are crucial to successful integration. Validation is an important factor in achieving this and can contribute to faster integration in working life and society.

In Iceland, the validation system is coordinated by the ETSC and is underpinned by the *European guidelines for validating non- formal and formal learning*. VPL projects are executed by 14 Lifelong

learning centres placed in regions around the country. They follow quality measures and training is coordinated nationally by ETSC. Projects vary based on regional needs, but all follow the national model. In Iceland validation offers are available for all individuals with little or low levels of qualifications free of charge. However, access and the process of validation services for non-Icelandic speaking individuals is a strenuous task and the formal school system has no systematic educational offers for non-Icelandic individuals who would like to complete their qualifications in regulated trades after the validation process. IDAN and others have made great efforts in assisting non-Icelandic speaking individuals in the validation process, but this is on an individual basis and is addressed without formalized support for migrants. In the picture here below is a diagram on how VPL is conducted nationally in Iceland. The VPL process in the VISKA project was based on the national approach. The red arrows in the picture here below indicate critical control points that needed attention when conducting the VISKA field trials with migrants.

VPL national system in Iceland

Process overview



Fig 1 The national VPL process and critical points when working with migrants

In 2007, the Flemish Government approved a new law for Adult Education in which the validation of prior learning was a concern. However, VPL was thought of in terms of assessing skills and competences of people so as to give exemptions for certain modules and to shorten the learning path. It is stated that the Centre's director can autonomously decide whether a learner can be exempted from specified modules. Awarding a full certificate based on VPL was not possible. The learner had to

enrol in at least one module to obtain the qualification. However, the legislator anticipated ‘a full assessment procedure’.

Article 63, §3 in the decree on adult education states that CAEs organising (additional) general education are authorised to assess adult learners *who are not enrolled in a course* at the centre. The assessment should be based on the approved curriculum and the Flemish Government would determine the modalities for this purpose. Nevertheless, no implementing decision from the Flemish Government has been taken to date. Therefore, the aim of the VISKA project was to give policy advice on whether and how a VPL procedure for AGE could be implemented.

The Federation of Second Chance Education (SCE), the umbrella organisation comprising all CAEs providing the course of AGE, developed exemption tests for the course of AGE. These served as a basis for the development of the exemptions tests, elaborated by engaged teachers on a voluntary basis and coordinated by the Federation of SCE. The tests are shared on a digital platform to be used by all centres of adult education offering the course of AGE. The candidates receive partial ‘unofficial’ certificates if they pass the tests, which leads to a shortened learning path or a less intense one.

This way of working brings the CAEs close to a VPL procedure, in the form of an exemption procedure which they have developed themselves. The centres all signed a covenant with the Federation of SCE whereby they agree to use the developed exemption procedure, including the use of the digital test. However, the Federation of SCE has no legal basis and no authority to impose regulations to the CAEs so cooperation is voluntary. This has an impact on the sustainability and quality of the validation process.

In Flanders, besides the CAEs, there is the Examination Board of Secondary Education – a certification institute for adult learners to obtain their diploma of secondary education. The Examination Board of Secondary Education is a unique centrally based organisation with no education possibilities and no extended guidance. This is in contrast with the CAEs, spread across the Flemish region, having access to education and certification facilities, with the focus on guidance.

Some low qualified adults combine both institutes. It is very attractive to learners, because it might be more in line with their personal needs, but it is hindered in practice by the fact that the attainment targets on which the course content is build are different, making it very difficult to correlate the results and causing lots of problems with granting exemptions between the two providers.

The VISKA field trials were used to investigate how we can guarantee more and equal VPL possibilities for the low-skilled adults and, to investigate whether a VPL procedure for AGE is of added value in obtaining a diploma in secondary education.

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, identification, documentation, assessment and certification.

Much of the development within further education and training (FET) has been organic and dynamic, with accelerated change in the last two years. A number of 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 national 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 VISKA project was considered as part of this lively confluence of activities and networks, including the testing of the EU Skills Profiling tool to contribute to the identification of skills for migrants and refugees. At the national level VISKA has been considered in the context of those who are low-skilled, with the limited pilot of the EU Skills Profiling tool being tested with migrants and refugees. This latter group were not the intended focus of VISKA in Ireland.

Validation activities and processes: Quantitative findings

The national reports of the different partner countries provide an extensive insight into the validation and processes which were implemented under VISKA (Annex 1-4). The validation activities and processes across VISKA shared the common vision to provide opportunity to candidates to go through the stages of validation, namely, Identification, Documentation, Assessment and Certification.

In Norway and Iceland, considerations such as language, progression pathways, use of an interpreter, standards used, support and assessment staff were captured as important considerations during the field trials. Expectations and satisfaction of validation were also captured before, during and after the field trials. Flanders focused on the fact that each centre has its own approach to and policy for VPL. It became apparent during the project that centres have to deal with different organisational barriers when offering VPL procedure/exemption tests. The infrastructure of centres and the availability of staff were identified as the highest barriers to VPL in Flanders.

In Ireland, the first stage of validation was tested with a group of migrants and refugees. As the test was developed as a standalone intervention without the development or consideration of a broader system it is acknowledged that the system recommendations are informed by the developing national context which is separate to the VISKA project however with some synergies.

What was evident in VISKA was the variation between countries like Norway and Iceland versus Flanders where validation arrangements are centrally agreed and implemented as opposed to the autonomy of centres determining how validation would or should be implemented. Ireland through reflection on national projects commented on how the autonomy of centres impacts the process and outcomes for the candidate.

Validation activities and processes: Qualitative findings

The following case studies, based on interviews after the field trials, illustrate how the validation process was experienced by learners with different profiles. These case studies are not intended to be exhaustive but indicative of a learner profile and their perspective of validation. One fundamental point which these case studies raise is that there is no typical profile of candidates who seek validation.

Learner case no 1

Candidate 1 is a man in his late forties who came from Turkey a year ago and has many years' experience from mechanical industry in his home country. During the identification of competences in the self-registration tool and the following career guidance session provided by the county career centre, it was agreed that he would be a good candidate for assessment towards the curriculum in industrial technology. The candidate himself decided to go through with the process.

The assessment took place in a workshop in an upper secondary school, assisted by an interpreter, in Turkish. The candidate and the assessor had a dialogue in the workshop using the machinery as objects for discussions of how, why, and for what they were used. The assessor got a clear view of the candidate's competences, and he was successfully assessed against several of the learning outcomes in the curriculum.

«Many of those who come here to Norway have a vocational profession, but it is not easy to get recognition for these competences in a new country. I am good at my profession. The validation procedure was very successful as my experience from home was relevant for the curriculum in Norway. I had good assistance from an interpreter in the assessment. » Turkish VISKA candidate

Learner case no 2

Candidate 2 is a woman in her late forties who has been working in health care in her local municipality after staying at the Integration Reception Centre. She wants to get a diploma as a health care worker, a four-year programme in VET at upper secondary level. She has had many different jobs and has worked for 7 years in the Norwegian Embassy in Asmara. She speaks both English and a little Norwegian.

After the identification/documentation and guidance phase, she agreed to continue the process. She was assessed against the curriculum as a health care worker at the career centre with the assistance of an interpreter, in Tigrinya. During the assessment, she presented her professional experiences through a dialogue between herself and the assessor, by discussing and reflecting around her practice. Many of the learning outcomes in the curriculum were successfully achieved, and she will be able to enter the VET programme in the second year of the four-year programme. She is exempted from the first year.

«The assessment was carried out in my own language, with the help of an interpreter. Being able to present my experiences in the profession using my own language made the process easier for me. »

Eritrean VISKA candidate

Learner case no 3

Candidate 3 is a 20 years old man with dyslexia and concentration problems who decided to leave school halfway the final year of secondary education after bad experiences of ‘miscommunication’ with a shop teacher. Knowing that he would not get his diploma, he started working. He started secondary school in general education but after three years continued his trajectory in technical education. This is what we call a ‘waterfall’ pupil. Immediately after leaving school, he also subscribed in a CAE to obtain the professional qualification of intercultural worker. He also enrolled in the course of AGE, to obtain a diploma of secondary education, which as he said *“you need to possess in our society”*.

For him, studying large quantities of learning material is very difficult. He has also a lack of self-structure and self-discipline to persevere with learning. Because of the dyslexia, it takes him so much time to read which slows down the studying process. In addition, he suffers from failure anxiety in exams. The fact that the CAE where he has enrolled provides a system of permanent evaluation suits him. It was on the recommendation of his friends that he went to a CAE to hear more about the possibilities to obtain his diploma secondary school. He knows the existence of the Examination Board of Secondary Education, where you can register for exams. However, he prefers a CAE because of the fact that in the Examination Board you are obliged to study large quantities of subject matter, without

guidance and permanent evaluation. Because of his failure anxiety and his concentration problems this was not an option.

Different sessions the learner was brought to

Intake moment: When entering the CAE he received information about how to obtain his diploma (combining a professional qualification with the course of AGE). He was pleased that the intake was a face to face interview, being much better in oral explanation. Typing text is very difficult for him due to his dyslexia. He perceived a great readiness from the frontline staff to listen. They asked a lot about his earlier school career and the reasons for dropping out of secondary school. He had the impression the frontline staff had a good picture of his abilities and insufficiencies. He appreciated their professional way of communicating, it was a very understandable and serene explanation.

“Yes yes yes [convinced] I have really told about my experiences in my last year of secondary school and why I didn't finish it. Uhm, they've been asking a lot of questions about that, about my internship and so on, so I said that's why it is that I haven't been able to succeed. And they asked me a lot more about that. Why? What was the problem? And so they were actually very quickly aware of my skills and my flaws. So yeah, that's all very well questioned.” [Interview 1, Adult learner; 202-208]

Documentation: He was very happy to hear that earlier obtained educational certificates were still valid. Because he passed his penultimate year in technical education he was exempted for English and some Dutch module units. He had to hand in his report card of his penultimate year, but he admitted that he had to be reminded of this several times by the trajectory counsellor.

Assessing: He was pleased to have the opportunity to participate in the exemption tests. He decided to participate in some exemption tests, but not all. He was exempted for some module units of mathematics and science. It has to be said however that he was not pleased with the exemption test for the module ICT consisting of three units. Failing one out of three units means that you do not get any exemption and still have to follow the three units, which implicates that some exemptions have no value at all.

“I really didn't like ICT, just because they assess you on the 3... Uhm because you have to do 3 modules of ICT. And then they all assess those 3 modules together. So when you don't pass one of the three you should just follow all. And I really didn't think that was positive because in the end I was just 2 points short of one and I had to follow the whole module and I already could do all that. That was boring.”

[Interview 1, Adult learner; 237-242]

Enrolling in the course AGE: After the tests, he enrolled in the course of AGE, to take up as quick as possible the missing curriculum components, in modules, followed by validation of his competences on basis of permanent evaluation. As said before it is, at the moment, not possible to get exempted for all modules so the learners still have to attend some modules.

Certification: He got his certificate at the start of 2019.

Learner case no 4

Candidate 4 is a 30 year old man who dropped out of secondary school at the age of 17 in the 4th year of part time vocational education. He decided to start working in the catering sector in which he still works today combined with a job in the construction sector. After having a job for several years, he decided to finally try to obtain a diploma of secondary education through the course of AGE in a CAE. He knew of the existence of the Examination Board of Secondary Education, where you can register for exams. However, self-study, isolated at home was not an option for him. With two little children he tried once but did not have enough perseverance. A few years later, last year, he became really motivated because he had the ambition to enrol in higher education studies. He really wants to build a better future for himself and his two little girls.

Different sessions the learner was brought to

Information session and intake moment: In the information session in the CAE he was told about the possibility to enrol in a VPL procedure and to participate in the exemption tests. As it was not the first time he enrolled in a CAE, the information session brought nothing new. He then completed a digital self-assessment tool in which he gave information about his motivations why to start the validation process, his demographic characteristics, his educational characteristics, his employment status and some other background information. He was very happy that, after the digital intake moment, there was time left for a face to face interview. He prefers direct and 'oral' communication, with immediate and personal response to his questions.

"I'd rather have a personal conversation. Well... then you can also just ask questions directly and you will get an immediate answer to them. I'm, well..., I still like normal communication." [Interview 4, Adult learner; 91-93]

Documentation: Because he enrolled before, all his prior qualifications were already known by the CAE so he did not have to provide any documents. He got a few exemptions for module units he already followed and succeeded the first time he enrolled.

Assessing: The fact that he could participate in a validation procedure (exemption tests) created an extra drive to start with the course, for several reasons. He had the opportunity to show the knowledge he acquired before, it makes the course trajectory less intense. He was told to enter all exemption tests he could take and was happy he did because he acquired exemptions in modules he did not expect. Because of the exemption tests he got more awareness of his own competences which gives a boost for his self-esteem and motivation to complete the course AGE.

Enrolling in the course of AGE: The trajectory guidance was of great help, as they are there to help you giving direction to your school career. They find out, together with you, what your personal interests are and they guide you in the right study direction.

“Yes yes absolutely (to the question ‘Was guidance of any help’) and what I’m going to do now is also a result of conversations with teachers here. So I’ve found my right path by doing this.” [Interview 4, Adult learner; 207-208]

Combining the course of AGE, the professional qualification and a fulltime job was hard, but he persevered.

Certification: He obtained his certificate of additional general education in June 2019, and is now enrolled in Higher Education.

Learner case no 5

Candidate 5 is a woman that came in for transversal skills, when she came in she was out of work but got work in the process because she is extremely positive. She has a licence to drive a bus after receiving such a licence in Iceland but could not use that work knowledge as she was a single mother and the work hours to drive a bus did not fit to the kindergarten hours. So, she got a job to clean houses for elderly people in Iceland. She’s visiting them at home, helping with cleaning. Also having some conversation so she has some contact with the language. She’s trying to talk to them in English but most of them doesn’t know because of their age. And, also she is taking the dinner to some places, driving around.” *When the interview was taken, she was extremely positive towards the future she had a job and she also had “a partner..., she got a dog. She won two million krónur in Lotto”. So, everything was working for her at the time. It was apparent in this interview how leading the translator was on the learner answers and how strong his views were. In a way it showed how sensitive the connection between the translator and the learner is. She explained that the only barrier was to dig deep enough: “The only difficulties was to go deeper and really check what I really did, when it was and stuff like that. And later she realized that she was doing more than she ever thought about, she put herself lower than she was at this moment. She had worked a lot with people before and she was even in managing positions and she just forgot about it. It was like, locked somewhere, put somewhere. So, this was a difficult part to dig into, somewhere in the memory.” “Yes, you can do better, you can do more than we thought but the only thing is just to go into the language,’ because the language barrier put her a little bit lower...”* But even though she experienced difficulty, she was so positive of all the services and all the process.

Learner case no 6

Candidate 6 is a man who has worked in the construction industry in Iceland for over five years. He had started to learn to become a building technician in Poland before coming here, but never thought about or had the knowledge how to get his studying confirmed and validated into the Icelandic system. An Icelandic friend saw the advertisement for the validation and pointed it out to him. He applied for validation for carpenter studies.

He had this to say about the process. *"I thought that the process was ok, but only ok... I wanted more information before I turned in the papers..."* For example, *"what kind of benefits are in taking part? What do I need to learn?"* He says that the information that he got from the validation process and the Technical College do not match. The validation process leads him to believe that this and this is fine, but the school says that he needs more than that. He is *"missing Icelandic, missing English, missing Danish, missing technical foundation courses and so much more."* He has finished the formal program by finishing two courses that have to do with window construction and interior fittings.

He has asked for guidance from the school on what more he needs to finish for the study of carpentry, and they haven't replied to him. Even so today his position is stronger than before he went for the validation process, today he works as a contractor for a company in Iceland as they know that he is almost finishing school *"they have more trust in what I know."* He believes also that when he has finished his formal education that his salary will increase, and his position will become stronger if he learns more Icelandic because then he will perhaps understand the Icelandic system.

Key findings

The approach in Norway has been to follow the same national procedure as for all other VPL candidates nationally. Working with different languages and interpreters towards national learning outcomes of Norwegian curricula has provided some invaluable insights which informs the future directions of inclusive validation processes in Norway.

In Iceland, experience of the validation process was a positive experience for all the participants who were also very complimentary of the validation support staff. Awareness of their broader skillset beyond that of the standards of a job profile or curricula and self-confidence were two positive outcomes from the Icelandic VISKA trials. The process however did not result in immediate life changes, but it did help them identify further opportunities. How to access these further opportunities was less clear to those involved in the Icelandic VISKA trials. The availability of information of the Icelandic system in the language of the participant was noted as being necessary as proficiency in

Icelandic was not high amongst the participants. The availability of qualified interpreters and clearer information about the next steps in education and in employment were also necessary. How formal qualifications obtained outside of the Icelandic system also require clarification and whether the NARIC database can be relevant here.

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

Thematic reflections from the Irish context, arising from networking through the National Advisory Group and other fora are generalisable across VISKA and 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 a recent QQI comprehensive consultation on assessment reflecting on validation.

In Ireland, 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 we would anticipate.

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. In Ireland, Skills for Work provides an effective strategy nationally, while not digital. Such approaches may equally not work at all for other cohorts and in all jurisdictions. 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

The key implication of the VISKA project for national validation systems is that the trials have shown that the process can be opened to new target groups if there is willingness to work with legislative, administrative and financial obstacles. It is possible to succeed in providing a pathway for low-skilled, migrants and refugees that acknowledges their professional and life competences, but it is resource intensive signalling the need for further investment.

It is important to acknowledge that due to the lack of regulations on how to elaborate a VPL procedure for adult learners in additional general education in Flanders, an external quality review of the VPL procedures offered by the centres is difficult.

Implications for future validation process development

The implications for future validation process development can be discussed under three considerations; the candidate, the providers which include guidance and front-line staff and the policy, strategy and process of validation.

The candidate

It has been found through the field trials and implementation of the five interventions that in order to get full benefit of the validation of prior learning for this target group it is important to give the potential candidate enough time to understand how an education system and the labour market work

within a country. The importance placed on the formal systems to get access to the job market or further education opportunities became obstacles for many VISKA learners as the validation systems and formal systems have not evolved to enable this transition to occur easily.

Through the VISKA field trials it was found that each candidate ready to complete the full VPL process needs support, especially through the first two phases of validation. It is important to support the identification and documentation of competences relevant for the specific curriculum or standards which are to be assessed in the assessment phase. The level of support may vary depending on the confidence of the learner to engage in the process.

The data in Flanders revealed that when candidates were obliged to enrol in the exemption tests, those candidates obtained more exemptions than when candidates were not obliged to participate in all the tests. It could be that candidates underestimate themselves. Considering the European guidelines regarding VPL (CEDEFOP) that participating in VPL should be voluntary, it is however highly recommended in the Flemish context to persuade candidates that participating in the exemption tests can benefit their self-esteem. Careful consideration around how to communicate this to the learners is necessary.

To get full effect of VPL, it is important to follow up with the candidate after the VPL process and motivate and support the candidate for further training or establish contact with employers, based on the certified competences from VPL. The value of the results from the VPL process need to be clearer for the participant/learner.

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 evident in the VISKA field trials, limited though they were.

Providers including guidance and front line staff

For the providers of VPL it is important to be aware of competences from abroad in order to make better use of immigrants' competences. It was found in Norway for instance that to recognise these competences early in the integration process and take them into account when setting up individual plans for further competence development or work practice may lead to faster and more efficient integration within their new environment.

To counteract the diversity of adult education it is necessary to consider a more transparent communication and a clear definition and vision on VPL for educational qualifications.

In developing the process of validation, further training for assessors and guidance counsellors and front-line staff on how to work with interpreters and translators is required. This add on should be part of the competence requirements of staff working in a validation system or process. It is important that applicants and staff have access to professional translators and interpreters who have competence in the relevant discipline being discussed.

Developing the skills for validation takes time and effort. To some extent CPD allows for this kind of reflection 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.**

Policy, strategy and process of validation

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

A strategy or procedure on how to reach the target populations of low-skilled, migrant and refugee requires careful consideration. This includes consideration around language and the use of interpreters to facilitate the process. Efforts to digitalize tools used in validation should be made.

Access to educational pathways and career development need to be in place.

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.

Policy implications

A clear policy statement regarding language proficiency with actions and funding to enable migrants to participate in VPL services and access educational pathways and career development are necessary to progress validation in Norway and Iceland. In Norway, to make VPL available for the VISKA target group, the five participating counties had to get an exemption from national regulations. **To make VPL available for this target group after the VISKA project, the national regulation needs to be amended which has been achieved during the lifetime of the project.**

The experience from VISKA has been one of the sources for this proposed amendment.

To broaden the application of the Validation of prior learning an **inclusive VPL framework, that reflects and supports migrant policy at national and international level** is required. There also has to be a move away from informal agreements and policies as was evident in Flanders for educational qualification in the CAEs.

Validation processes are comprised of different steps or actions that must be taken to achieve reliable results **built on quality standards and procedures**. The next generation of VPL should entail a multi targeted VPL- approach. VPL process need to further develop the learning goals of the individual, linking processes to employability, active citizenship, social awareness and educational pathways. This approach puts education and support and guidance at the core of the VPL process, underpinning a central role of importance. It has been identified through the findings that this can be reached by learning from the five-step intervention model of VISKA.

Implications of policy

In every national context of VISKA the existing policies were found to be insufficient for the needs of low-skilled, migrants and refugees seeking validation for their prior learning. This can relate to how the system of validation is funded and supported as was evident in Norway where VPL is funded through a block education grant from the national government, so **local provision depends on local priorities**. In the five VISKA counties the overall VPL procedures are the same, but differences in organisation of the Integration Reception Centre, the career guidance centre and the assessment staff available have influenced the VISKA trials in some detail.

It is clear from the finding in this chapter that the **existing VPL process needs to be adjusted to migrant needs**. This means a clear policy statement on ways forward in migrant inclusion.

Nationally in each partner context 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 improve. The need to protect and nurture progress is clear, including with staff engaged and developing specialist skills in validation but sometimes on temporary contracts, these form part of the larger organisational challenges of many services.

Implications for policy

In the partner countries of the VISKA trials, **the roles and responsibilities** between the different levels of administration involved, **need to be discussed and clarified**. A clear **division of labour** is necessary to avoid confusion and repetition of processes in a broader VPL system.

Since local priorities may lead to low priority of VPL due to lack of resources, it is crucial that **national actors maintain and communicate a high awareness around VPL issues**, so as to emphasise its importance and influence actors regionally/locally and encourage policy coherence.

The participants/learners stressed the challenge of **language barriers** during the validation process and in general within the national contexts. Careful consideration must be given within each national context that policies and procedures are put in place to place the learner and their needs at the centre. It was evident through VISKA that low-skilled, migrants and refugees bring a range of valuable skills which contribute to the economy of a country and it is important that mechanisms are put in place to ensure that these benefits are fully realised.

In general, across all the country contexts of VISKA there is a need for a **more visible framework on VPL** which could incorporate educational qualifications, employment opportunities, trade qualifications or better integration into their new national context. This may be achieved through a uniform or flexible framework depending on the national, regional and local context. Regardless of the context, the importance of transparent communication, of a common vision and definition and high qualitative instruments to support the further and future development of validation should not be underestimated. Validation in all national contexts is one element of a much larger system and process and consideration has to be given to the pre and post validation phases which ensure meaningful impacts for those involved. As an example, in Flanders the possibility of obtaining partial certificates validating the prior learning of individuals and enabling the gaps in learning to be conventionally gained would be a momentous step forward.

VISKA 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 recognition itself.**

It is recommended therefore that a **requirement for validation proofing be inbuilt to funding streams addressing this cohort, 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 individual-oriented basis rather than on a sectoral basis.

Developing and extending regional/ national networks

This chapter provides description and analysis of the partnerships and networks which have existed and have developed to support the work of VISKA. The analysis includes an assessment of the strengths, achievements and challenges in developing and maintaining these partnerships and networks.

Building and sustaining networks

In Norway, there is **no established national network for validation professionals in upper secondary education, including VET**. However, there is a **national conference on adult education in upper secondary education** held each year by one of the counties for a selected number of professionals from each county. In these conferences, **validation is usually included in the agenda**.

Following the VISKA trials, **Skills Norway intends to establish a network with validation professionals to support local practice and enhance agreement nationally on how to support validation development**. It has been an ongoing challenge that the different counties in Norway conduct validation differently due to local priorities. If this leads to significant differences in how the **legal rights for citizens** are implemented across the country, it needs to be addressed, for instance through national networking. During the VISKA trials, Skills Norway was involved in several networking settings.

The **Integration Reception Centres** were in a network comprising all involved actors, such as **municipalities hosting the centres and providing primary education and language training, career centres providing career guidance and directorates responsible for granting asylum and providing housing for refugees**. Public Employment Services were also involved. Skills Norway attended these network meetings to present VISKA and establish contacts. Taking part in the meetings proved to be very useful for building motivation to participate in VISKA. It was possible to present the project for all involved actors at the same time and to stimulate fruitful discussions about obstacles and challenges, such as how to recruit candidates, how to inform correctly about the benefits of validation at this early stage and how to make sure that the candidate had the relevant background of education and/or work experience.

The five counties responsible for providing validation towards learning outcomes in upper secondary education were involved in a VISKA network during the trial period. Two representatives from each county regularly exchanged experience and challenges. This interaction was useful for keeping up the pace in the trials, discussing common challenges in recruiting candidates and making validation arrangements.

A **National Advisory Group, NAG**, was set up during the VISKA trials in Norway comprising the Ministry of Education and Research, the Directorate of Work and Welfare, the Directorate of Immigration, the

Directorate of Integration and Diversity, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training and Skills Norway. This formed a **network with national stakeholders** responsible for all public services involved in the Integration Reception Centres including the directorate responsible for education at upper secondary level, provision that was not included in the Integration Reception Centres at that point. This network proved to be very useful in anchoring VISKA activities locally that involved the Integration Reception Centres, the career centres and the county administration providing the validation process.

In Iceland, Although the national VPL system has high stakeholder involvement, there was a need to establish a **network focusing on the needs of people with migrant background to work towards increased access and support**. The main aim was to develop a **common vision and consensus of the value of VPL in making skills and qualifications of the target group more visible and comparable**. There was also a need to gather stakeholders on the issue to bring forth existing aims and measures being implemented by different partners at ministry, municipality, organisational and practical levels. Through that, existing networks could also be made more visible and cooperation established between institutions and organisations. Therefore, the representatives from different stakeholders were invited to take part in the **National Advisory Group (NAG), including: Ministry of education, science and culture; Ministry of Welfare; Association of national municipalities; Association of providers of adult education; Directorate of labour; the Red cross and a representative from the Polish community in Iceland**. Also, IDAN established a group of local stakeholders where representatives of the **social partners** took part to follow the project and provide feedback.

During the VISKA project other networks linked to the ETSC and IDAN have been informed and consulted on issues related to VPL for the target groups. Those include networks of **project managers and guidance practitioners; social partners; companies; and people with migrant background**.

The main importance of establishing the National Advisory Group (NAG) around the VISKA project and connecting networks was to share information and establish cooperation based on common knowledge to be based on the findings of the VISKA project. Through networks it was possible to **define challenges and identify ways to tackle them**, for example how to fund the development of appropriate processes and tools for the target group within the existing VPL system.

Through the cooperation with the NAG, main challenges have been identified and discussed. The Ministry of Welfare presented the action plan for migrants for the period of 2016-2019, which had aims focused the educational attainment of people with migrant background. Meetings were held with the Ministry of Welfare to present the VISKA project in more detail in order to support the aims of the action plan. The NAG has taken part in discussing challenges that have arisen in the VISKA VPL

process and each of the representative has had the opportunity to discuss the issues within their category of work.

Through the National Advisory group, a more detailed baseline was defined on existing networks or lack of them. This field (**migrants/refugees**) is **very fragmented and has not been an issue in Iceland until very recently**. For identification of development an overview of **existing networks and connections between them was produced**. A **common consensus among networks on priority issues related to validation of prior learning for migrants** will be produced following the results of the VISKA project. A realization of the action points set forth in the Parliament action plan for migrants will be highlighted in cooperation with the relevant committees and in line with the aims of VISKA. This will be done in cooperation with the Ministry of Welfare and Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

In addition to the NAG, IDAN established an advisory group with representatives from the social partners.

In Flanders, because of the new decree of VPL for professional qualifications, it was logical that the stakeholders, engaged in the decree on VPL for vocational qualifications within the field of Education and Training, were asked to be part of the NAG.

In Ireland, a NAG was established to discuss the outcomes and developments of the other country contexts of VISKA and consider them in the Irish context and how they could inform future developments nationally.

Existence and scope of partnerships and networks

In Norway, the composition of one network focused on involving the political actors which included the Ministry of Education and Research, responsible for the national provision of VPL and for integration; the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration, responsible for handling the asylum seekers and decision on status ;the Directorate of Integration and Diversity, responsible for provision of integration activities after status is established; the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, responsible for formal education at primary, secondary and upper secondary education and VPL at those levels; the Norwegian Directorate of Work and Welfare, responsible for social and employment services, including PES and finally Skills Norway, chairing the group

The **VISKA project network** in Norway included representatives from the adult education units and the career centres from the five counties Nordland, Trøndelag, Oslo, Vestfold and Vest-Agder

VISKA in Norway also liaised with the **network of Integration Reception Centres**; this included the five Integration Reception Centres, county career centres and local PES . The Directorate of Work and

Welfare, Directorate of Immigration and the Directorate of Integration and Diversity were present at these meetings.

In Iceland, establishing the networks was not a challenge. All representatives were willing to take part, although not everyone was able to participate in all meetings (2 per year). It is quite evident though that **cooperation among stakeholders represented in the group could be enhanced**.

There are several existing networks that focus on the development and quality of VPL, for example:

- The ETSC and career counsellors at the 14 lifelong learning centres have a network/working group that meets twice per year to review quality issues and developments linked to career counselling and VPL.
- The ETSC regularly participates in working group meetings with trained project managers and assessors in order to get feedback from practice and share new information.
- ETSC has representatives in the Nordic network for adult learning (NVL) in the career counselling network and in the validation network.
- There are working groups linked to the Parliamentary resolution for an action plan in migrant issues set for 2016-2019, working towards making skills of people with migrant background visible.

Those networks have been informed and consulted during the VISKA project and will continue to be important actors in further development.

The networks within Flanders spanned both education and national policy partners. The education partners included the Federation for second chance education, the Pedagogical Advisory service, the Education Inspectorate, the Examination Board of Secondary Education and the Learning shops who provide independent guidance and advice for adult learners. These were supplemented by National policy partners including the Flemish agency for higher education, Adult Education, Qualifications and Study grants. The Department of Education and Training and the Flemish Education council. These organisations were best placed to support the target learners of VISKA and the potential outcomes and impact of a VPL procedure for general education in Flanders.

In Ireland, the NAG comprised of educational partners from higher and vocational education and training, national policy partners from education and social protection, representative body partners including those in teacher education, trade unions and representative bodies of the target group in Ireland. In addition, consultation occurred with the Irish RPL practitioner network and the representative organisations in a VET validation project called 'Tobar'.

In considering the composition of each of the national networks it varied according to the existing national contexts and the different actors which required consultation to further develop validation for the candidates of VISKA and in general. It was noted by the partners that it was important to carefully consider who should be part of the NAG and also what other networks should be consulted with to ensure a clear understanding of the opportunities and challenges which advance or hinder validation in each of the national contexts.

Developing and sustaining networks: challenges and barriers

In Norway, there was no issue in engaging however the networks will not sustain beyond the project in their current guise. They have paved the way for the establishment of such a network going forward.

Iceland had a similar experience in terms of establishing the networks which was not a challenge. All representatives were willing to take part, although participation varied. The network highlighted the need for further and better collaboration between the different stakeholders. Collaboration with the other existing networks will also be important going forward.

In order to progress collaboration in Flanders art. 63, §3 of the decree on adult education requires amendment to ensure agreements are binding. The usefulness of a more structured cooperation between the Examination Board of Secondary Education and the Federation of SCE would assist in building a more coherent system in Flanders. The need for combined systems to obtain a diploma of secondary education who emphasize that the attainment targets need to be aligned with each other so that you will have the same time frame to work with. This would tackle the issue of little or no quality control on the granting of exemptions in CAEs who offer AGE.

Strengths and achievements

In VISKA, a strength is what was done well which leads to other successes and the achievements are outcomes of those successes.

In Norway, the networks of the reception centres and the networks with the counties were crucial to the success of the VISKA trials. The network of the counties enabled insight to be gained on the variances between the local operations of the counties. Support from the national directorates was needed in order to get the field trials up and running. There were a number of bodies that needed to be involved to get the refugees through the first two stages of validation and to get career guidance and assessment/ certification in the VISKA project. This provides good insight on the requirements of the system going forward.

In Iceland, Validation of Prior Learning and discussion are a part of the educational culture in Iceland. The VISKA project itself is an addition that has broadened the scope, so relative parties are already

aware of what validation is. As a result of VISKA the conversation is deeper and there are new areas that have not been discussed before. It is a new experience to apply validation to migrant workers and those who do not speak Icelandic.

It is important to continue the VISKA collaboration in Iceland where future development can build on the project groundwork and experience and continue to expand this offer to migrant workers so they can utilise their experience in the labour market. The Education and Training Service Centre and IDAN-education and training centre will continue with the VPL for migrants after the lifetime of the project. There is an **official policy in Iceland that migrants should benefit from their education** and VISKA has identified elements requiring attention before this is a reality in Iceland.

The Iceland government influences whether the current policy of Iceland supports or hinders the development of VISKA. The project itself addresses the implementation of migrant policy in Iceland.

Some potential obstacles are foreseen in the Icelandic context such as the availability of space for additional students in education and the challenge with language.

In Flanders, in addressing the development of the decree the stakeholders saw the need for more regulations in VPL for educational qualifications. VISKA enhanced the current network in Flanders and decisions and agreements had a stronger support.

VISKA provided a start for cooperation and consultation between those engaged in VPL for educational qualifications. The importance of more transparency on VPL for educational qualifications to facilitate a better orientation and guidance of targets groups. Optimising the learners' learning path raises the proposition of a neutral guidance and information centre.

Key findings

The key findings across the partner countries of VISKA varied due to context but there were some similarities in what was required to drive validation through regional and national networks. The importance placed on the continuation or establishment of local and regional networks located close to the practice field were emphasised. In order for this to be realised funding is required to support the developments as identified in each national context. The support of the policy makers and influencers is vital to advance the developments at the local and regional levels and further cooperation is required between the practice and policy stakeholders.

Key implications

Across VISKA support from the political level is key to influencing change in the local, regional and national context. The importance of cross sectoral networking for vulnerable groups can influence

system development and change. The area of validation is not without its obstacles and challenges which need to be explored in order for a more inclusive and equitable society to emerge.

Implications for future validation development

The importance and the composition of networks supporting and informing validation was a significant influencer on the outcomes of VISKA in each national context. It provided the mechanism to discuss the required changes and developments necessary to integrate validation into the national contexts of the VISKA partner countries.

Policy implications

Language proficiency and national regulations pertaining to language were identified as a significant discussion point across the networks of partner countries who had identified it as the fundamental blockage for validation thus requiring a focus on solutions and a way forward.

Implications of policy

The current policies in Norway, Iceland and Flanders hindered the development of a complete validation system which integrated into the broader national qualification and employment context. The particular legal frameworks and policies were identified which required amendment in order to progress validation forward. It is important to note that the existing legal frameworks were not originally devised to exclude stakeholders but as with any change in the profile and needs of the citizens of a country the legal frameworks can be challenged.

Implications for policy

Across each of the national contexts the contribution of the various stakeholders in informing the policy amendments required to adequately support further and future developments in validation. The composition and contribution of the cross sectoral networks were fundamental in this regard as they provided the mechanism for open and frank discussions between the different stakeholders as to what was required by the various learner groups with regard to validation, education and employment opportunities. Since the inception of VISKA there have been changes at the national levels which strengthen the cooperation between the different stakeholders involved in validation. However, as identified in Flanders agreeing a common vision, definition, communication framework which is underpinned by quality assurance with the support of government agencies provides a useful foundation.

Extending and adapting tools used in the validation of prior learning for Low-skilled, migrants and refugees

At the inception of the project the following were identified as the type of tools that can be used to support staff and learners in validation. The list is broad to facilitate all learners and multiple contexts where validation may be possible. It can include:

- Paper based templates and resources with more up to date on-line 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.

These tools can be paper-based or digitalised depending on the profile of the learner group.

Context and aims

In relation to extending and adapting tools there were a number of existing tools in each of the national contexts. In Norway, an online self-registration tool was available in multiple languages. In Iceland, many paper-based national tools were available and the EU Skills Profiling tool was an addition to test user friendliness. In Flanders, exemption tests are used to recognise and validate the knowledge, skill and competence of those pursuing the course of AGE. These are available through a digital platform.

Validation tools for low-skilled, migrants and refugees

Tool selection, development and use

The Norwegian self-registration tool for asylum seekers (*Kompass*) was commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Research and customised for asylum seekers by Skills Norway, in cooperation with the Directorate of Integration and Diversity. The objective of the tool is to provide the municipality with a basis for individually adjusted activities targeted towards social inclusion and professional qualifications. The tool is available in 14 languages: Albanian, Arabic, Dari, English, Farsi, French, Kurmanji, Kurdish-Sorani, Norwegian, Oromo, Pashto, Russian, Somali, Tigrinya. It is intended to be used independently by the learner. However, many learners need support from a staff member.

Four tools were trialled in Iceland which built on existing tools for different target groups and were translated into Polish for the particular target group in Iceland. A trial of the e-portfolio tool EU Skills

profiling tool was undertaken in Iceland by a small number of the target group under the guidance of a career counsellor. The tools aimed to capture general skills, transversal and job standard specific skills.

Three tools were trialled in Flanders which focused on different aspects of the process of VPL within their field trials. The first was a registration form for VPL, the second was an online form for intake, slightly adjusted to gather information for VPL and the final tool were the existing exemption tests used for VPL.

In Ireland, a limited test of the EU Skills Profiling tool was done to test the user experience of the tool and its relevance to learners and their learning.

Strengths and achievements

The tools in each of the national contexts provided guidance and front-line staff with a place to start with the various target groups. It provided a means of knowing the background of the individual before the process started which was a huge advantage to all stakeholders in the process including the learner. The tools provided the opportunity to the learner to reflect on, capture and realise the breadth and depth of their learning. Consistency in the process was enabled through the use of tools to streamline and guide the process.

Challenges and barriers

Assistance was required by the candidate from guidance and front-line staff to use and complete tools as the language was challenging and the variation between the education and employment systems were confusing to many of the participants. It was through the use of the tools that it became evident how the past experiences of these vulnerable groups can influence their willingness to engage due to scepticism of engaging with official systems. The reliance on the skills and knowledge of interpreters emerged as a challenge in VISKA. The use of jargon in tools and the knowledge and skills of interpreters in specialised disciplines and functions was identified as a challenge. The completeness of information and the variation in interpretation of staff and candidates to open questions was also identified as an issue. Further translation and digitalisation of tools were possibilities for enabling the participant groups to document their prior learning with the proviso that some will require additional support.

It was noted that cooperation within VISKA depended on the voluntary participation of different stakeholders and that to develop a sustainable comprehensive approach to validation that consideration of costs and resources is required.

Key findings

The priority placed by stakeholders on different elements of the process was interesting. The availability of additional support was not seen as important or necessary by staff involved in the validation process with the exception of the self-registration tool in Norway, but it was by the different learner groups which informs future system developments.

The impact of interpreters on the process of validation was not fully foreseen in VISKA. This created some challenges but also identified the opportunity and way forward for validation in countries who have an influx of candidates with a variety of language needs. This related to another intervention of the project, developing the competence of staff including interpreters through training.

Quality assurance and quality control were identified as areas requiring attention where a consistent approach and process for validating prior learning is not agreed and implemented.

Through the use of tools candidates did have a greater awareness of their competences which empowered and encouraged them to seek further opportunities.

Key implications

The tools used in VISKA worked well with the assistance of guidance and front-line staff as help was required with understanding some of the contextual concepts. The availability of qualified interpreters in the identification and documentation stages of validation was key to success in the Norwegian and Icelandic contexts. Guidance and Front-line staff require training in multicultural understanding and working with interpreters as the new learner groups challenged existing knowledge and practices.

A lack of transparency about the process or a legal framework complicates the development of a coherent and consistent system locally, regionally and nationally.

Implications for future validation development

In Norway, VISKA has influenced the use of the self-registration tool in all reception centres with the proviso that it can be amended when needed. In Iceland, testing the quality of tools after translation is necessary to ensure tools are asking and gathering the information being sought. Competence development of all staff including interpreters requires investment. The tools which are used within a validation system should be fit for purpose and consistently applied within the national system for all potential applicants.

Policy Implications

A concerted effort must be made regarding policy making to support and action plans to develop a tool or tools suitable for all learners including migrants, refugees and low-skilled. Funding will be required for tool development, for translations and in the addition of interpreters in the validation system and process. As was evident within VISKA, validation and the process of validation is the starting point for many, so systematic access to guidance among low-skilled, migrants and refugees on career issues and choices is important.

Implications of policy

Extending the use of an existing tool in Norway demonstrates how existing mechanisms can be extended to include new learner groups in validation. Although the candidates needed support during the process and this requires extra resourcing, the resulting registration of background and competence, and the transferability of this information once registered, was regarded as time well spent.

Existing policies in Iceland require amendment as they do not sufficiently cater for the needs of migrants and their integration and progression within Icelandic society. Coupled with policy amendments is the need to adequately train staff and interpreters in working with migrant populations.

In order for any future and further developments to occur in Flanders amendments need to be made to the decree to require centres to more collectively work together on a common system which will also enhance the quality assurance of the exemption tests.

Implications for policy

The availability and development of appropriate tools has been identified as being fundamental for all stakeholders in the validation process. The success of the tool and the output does depend on appropriate support being available to those completing the tool and also the staff working with the eventual output. Validation is acknowledged as being part of a much broader system and careful consideration must be given to the pre and post validation stages. This suggests the need for an action plan on education and career possibilities for the target groups of VISKA but also raises the broader implications of validation for all learners who should have progression pathways and opportunities available to them. Investment is required within the system and supports including the training and development of personnel.

Transversal Skills

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

The VISKA partnership described criteria for assessing transversal skills, (D3.2). These criteria were used as a basis for the Icelandic trial on transversal skills.

Context and aims

Transversal skills are integrated into the curriculum of three of the four partner countries so that they are contextually assessed within these systems. In Iceland, transversal skills are incorporated into school curriculum but through activities prior to VISKA standards and tools for validating employability skills was developed in cooperation with stakeholders. These tools were further adjusted for use within the VISKA trials and additional mapping materials were developed.

Transversal Skills overview

Transversal skills are often discussed and highlighted in labour market. Transversal skills are validated when they are included in the learning outcomes in the relevant curriculum. This links the different transversal skills closely to each relevant professional context and thus makes it possible to validate the relevant transversal skill in the context of accepted standards. This is similar within all the four VISKA partner countries.

It is generally agreed that some transversal skills are difficult to evaluate and whether they can be separated from the context in which they were gained. There is also the school of thought that transversal skills can not be adequately acquired or measured outside of the formal system due to lack of agreed standards. The question in Flanders centres on whether an exemption test should be available for transversal skills.

Challenges and Barriers

The visibility of transversal skills within curriculum is not always obvious to the learner who finds it difficult to decouple from the context in which it is associated and embedded. In the Flemish context there is belief that transversal skills develop and grow through the formal setting and that attendance and active participation are determining factors to success.

Key findings

As part of the VISKA project Iceland were the only country who incorporated the validation of transversal skills as a targeted activity of the field trials. VPL of Transversal skills based on the tools developed in the VISKA project was successful and five of the participants in Iceland formally validated

their transversal skills. The interpretation of text slowed the process and affected the flow of communication between the guidance/ front line staff and candidate.

In Flanders exemption tests in transversal skills were not available as staff preferred to work face to face in class on transversal skills and as they lack the capacity or capability to measure transversal skills through an exemption test.

Key implications

The measure needs further testing and development based on VISKA results in Iceland. Guidance personnel and assessors need training in multicultural aspects and how to work with an interpreter before working on VPL.

Interpretation and the use of interpreters effects the flow of the conversations taking place. A factor that must be taken into consideration in the process.

A new approach to assess transversal skills in Flanders is needed, based on the principles that learners do not have to be known by their teachers and that it is possible to assess most transversal skills by means of an evidence-based evaluation.

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

In Iceland, future financing for interpreters linked to VPL for migrants needs to be in place. Training of guidance personnel and assessors in working with interpreters and migrants needs to be in place to create an appropriate system of support underpinned by quality assurance.

In other systems such as Flanders continued networking and discussion is required to identify future opportunities. At a European level, transversal skills are topical and general considerations around the importance of these need to be surfaced and referenced.

Policy implications

The importance placed on transversal skills and their application within the workplace domain are acknowledged in VISKA. Their relevance in enabling individuals to respond to workplace needs of the future requires consideration and the contribution which validation can make to this. The perspective of the social partners including employers and trade unions in this discussion are important in developing a more considered validation approach of transversal skills going forward.

Implications of policy

As a result of the current funding allocation and the informal arrangements between centres there is no time or money allocated to develop the exemption tests in Flanders.

Implications for policy

The validation of transversal skills and their adaptability and usefulness within the broader societal and economic context have emerged through VISKA. The readiness of countries to enable their citizens to respond adequately to the fourth industrial revolution and the workplace needs of the future requires explicit policy statements and national strategies.

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

In Norway, career guidance has been in focus in adult education since 2011. In all counties there are career centres serving the adult population, and competence development for career counsellors is developing rapidly. Today, all career counsellors have some level of specialised training, ranging from shorter courses to a full master's degree in Career counselling. Staff who work with validation have been trained by the county administration.

In the Icelandic national system, it is required by set quality assurance standards for VPL that validation staff undergoes training in VPL before working with participants in the validation process. The course is two days long and is coordinated and delivered by the Education and Training Service Centre (ETSC). The training focuses on three main staff categories within the process: Project managers, guidance personnel and assessors.

Programme staff experience, education and training prior to VISKA

As previously mentioned in Norway staff have been trained by the county administration in how to work with validation; how to communicate with the candidate, the use of different methods of assessment (documentation/portfolio, interview, practical testing), discussions on similar/equal versus identical competences and use of tools in the process. This training is provided locally in each county, based on national guidelines provided by the Directorate for Education and Training.

The validation staff taking part in the VISKA project in Iceland had all undergone the initial training required. The purpose of the course is to introduce the concept of validation to participants, train them in conducting validation of prior learning according to the national model for low-skilled people.

In Flanders, there is variation between the CAEs due to their autonomy and the agreement between them is very informal and without a legal basis. They are very experienced and professional in working with the different stakeholders by training and development is not streamlined within a national system.

Guidance Activities

In Norway, all residents are provided career guidance by career counsellors from the career centre in the county. The career guidance session is based on the prior self-registration of competences using

the tool, described previously. This may be a dialogue which happens face to face or in a group. The objectives of these sessions are to set up an individual plan for future activities towards further education and training and work and supported by interpreters where required. This is very similar to the process available in Iceland. There is no formal role for a guidance or trajectory counsellor within the current system in Norway.

Defining competence

In addition to the existing training for guidance and front-line staff working in validation it was identified that validation professionals needed competences in how to work with interpreters and in multicultural awareness since they had no prior experience with this kind of assisted communication.

In Iceland, the role of guidance personnel and assessors is clearly defined in the national model and overview of tasks is handed out during the training as quality support so working with an interpreter when English or Icelandic cannot be used and for project managers to have all material available in translated versions was a new departure. In Flanders, the foundations of VPL for AGE must be embedded in a Quality Assurance or Quality Control manner with the CAEs.

Aims

The general aim of the capacity building of guidance and front-line staff is outlined in the output of D3.3 which details the totality of competence required by staff to adequately support the candidate in their application for validation. The key aim of the training programme was to prepare the validation professionals for working with interpreters in the validation procedures. Also, what to expect and not expect from an interpreter. A new activity for assessors is to work with material in other languages (translated self-assessment lists f.ex) and to work closely with an interpreter during the assessment interview. In Flanders, VISKA provided the opportunity to gain an insight into the professionalism of front-line staff involved in VPL for education qualifications.

Achieving high standards of guidance and front-line staff competence

As previously stated, existing training and staff development were already available and implemented in Norway and Iceland. The framework as devised under work package 3 of VISKA incorporated these elements as content for other national contexts with less developed professional development systems. The addition of the competence training of front line and guidance staff in working with interpreters and in developing a multicultural understanding contributed to enhancing the existing skill set of staff. These elements were also incorporated into the module as detailed in deliverable 3.3.

In Norway, the additional training under VISKA was not mandatory, not everyone participated but those who did found it useful. Participation in the additional training was required in Iceland which provided them with the additional skills necessary to work with the migrant group.

The autonomy of centres to set up and establish training required consideration on how best to proceed in Flanders. These considerations were deemed more important when the outcome led to a certificate. The question of how to guarantee quality, the link to official regulations and to projects like VISKA was raised as being an important consideration.

Staff Perspectives (Guidance and Front-Line Staff)

Training and capacity building were regarded as important to very important to all stakeholders in Norway and Iceland who undertook the training in the context of VISKA. The training which they undertook, and they felt was necessary was in the areas of general VPL procedures, standards, assessment and working with the interpreters. In Iceland the training also included a review of methods and tools including the self-assessment list and other tools in a systematic way. This enhanced the professional competency of staff in their familiarity with the broader validation system. Training and capacity building was not conducted in Flanders and Ireland, however interactions with staff emphasised the importance of training and the availability of comprehensive training when required within the national and local contexts. The willingness to share beyond the limited interactions of VISKA was also a positive indicator for future development.

Key strengths and achievements

The key achievements of the training programme in Norway were to provide the VPL professional with knowledge on how to work with interpreters. Since the training was optional not all of the assessors benefitted from it. The training programme was easily accessible as it was delivered as a digital module to the professionals to use freely in their own time. This is both an advantage and a disadvantage; it is easy to use and at the same time easy to skip or forget to use. To use it by yourself in your own time is also practical, but you lose the added value of socialising, peer learning and the development of a community of practice.

One of the participating counties invited all VPL assessors participating in VISKA to a common training in working with interpreters in VPL. In this gathering, a constructive exchange of experiences about how to best reveal the candidate's competences occurred. This activity was very well received by the assessors, so this is something this county will continue to do for assessors outside of the VISKA project.

In Iceland, competent and educated frontline staff is a strength within the national system, in addition to agreed quality standards that have to be met in practice. The frontline staff have expressed that the additional training offered in the VISKA project was very valuable for them as professionals; first related to cultural understanding and secondly linked to the role of the interpreter and how to work with an interpreter in the assessment interview.

Challenges and Barriers

As within any national system there are only a limited number of people with the required skillset to support or assess learning a VPL context. This is a challenge for the sustainability of the system going forward unless there is some investment nationally. The time required to engage with the learner group and the associated costs with that could have an effect on quality. The lack of cooperation between difference services and specialists linked with the various participant groups can act as a barrier for future development.

Key Findings

In the VISKA trials the training programme made available for front-line staff provided a basis for working with interpreters. The training programme was not mandatory in Norway and was used either in a group setting or in personal studies if needed. The training programme got mostly positive feedback from those who used it. Training in Iceland, which was conducted face to face in a group setting incorporated elements such as multicultural understanding and working with interpreters. They were building on an already established learning foundation through previous training. The approach to training did support the establishment of a network and a support group amongst professionals for professionals.

Key Implications

In Norway, the training programme will still be made available after the VISKA trials. The use of interpreters will probably increase in the VPL processes as the necessary amendment in the national regulations is approved. A module on working with interpreters would have a natural place in a possible future development of staff training. The implications of the training in Iceland has been the increase in competence of staff to meet the needs of migrants and to increase the quality of services. Developing the competency to work with interpreters was also a successful outcome of the project.

Implications for future validation process development

The NAG in Norway and Iceland supposes that the need for competence development for staff will probably grow, in order to reach the new target group, along with general competence development to assure quality in the practice. They point out that continuous professional development for VPL

staff is important. The NAG in Flanders mentions that VPL might be included as a regular element in professional development for teachers. There is still some scepticism towards VPL in working life. Therefore, it might be important that professional development for VPL becomes part of a system in which credits are given, in order to increase its status and perceived seriousness.

The competence of staff is the foundation of quality services and VISKA has identified the need for additional training in working with interpreters and multicultural understanding so that staff can adequately respond to the needs of learners. Flanders identified a further implication for job descriptions and the definition of roles of front -line staff in all phases as professionalism can guarantee quality.

Policy implications

Relevant training programmes for professional staff in VPL will always be needed. The module from VISKA will contribute to the pool of such relevant programmes. In addition to the training of staff to work with interpreters, consideration must also be given to the training of interpreters to work in a validation context.

Implications of policy

In Norway, the training of VPL professionals in upper secondary education and training is the responsibility of the providing county. Each county has their own routines for this training. The VISKA training module was made available for each candidate to use as suited in their local context, since there are no central training requirements.

Implications for policy

The training module provided by VISKA has introduced the use of interpreters in the VPL process. Given the approval of the amendment in national regulations regarding languages in Norway, it is foreseeable that this or similar training will be included in the training provided by the county for their VPL professionals. In general, it can be concluded that further investment for training of front- line staff and guidance is required so that existing methods, processes and procedures are adjusted for the new learner groups as identified through VISKA. A professionalisation policy of validation should also incorporate the role and training of interpreters. Policies need to be based on a uniform QA framework for all aspects of the VPL procedure. Policies should also strive for a common definition and view of VPL and incorporate standard requirements and optional elements.

Access to and Awareness of Validation services

This chapter focuses on the dissemination activities to increase awareness of validation services by the target audience as well as those directly engaged with the target audiences and other support staff. It reflects the strategies of informing the target groups about the opportunity of validation, such as interacting with the target groups directly or with the organisations that have existing contact with the target audience. Access to and awareness of validation services in VISKA have been focused on engaging with learners who would not normally be engaged with on validation or on further education or employment opportunities.

Validation is included in government legislation and the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture issued regulations on validation of prior learning and how this is to be implemented in Iceland. Social partners such as employee and employer associations support VPL. Formal and informal education systems are aware and support VPL. Role of career counsellors are central to the success of VPL services.

Access to and awareness of validation services in VISKA Flanders have not been focused on engaging with learners, as the VISKA learners were all learners who had already applied to join the participation in the exemption procedure to obtain a diploma of Secondary education

Context and aim

In Norway, validation of prior learning has been on the political agenda since 1999 and since 2001 VPL has been a statutory right in formal education for adults, with some limitations in the different education levels. At upper secondary level, which is relevant for the VISKA project, adults older than 25 without prior completed upper secondary education, have a statutory right to VPL toward learning outcomes in the national curricula in upper secondary education, including VET. In VISKA the participating counties needed to get exemption from the language regulation. All the five VISKA counties got this exemption from the Directorate for Education and Training in due time before the VISKA trials started.

One of the planned actions Skills Norway will consider is to establish a practitioners' network to follow up and support local practice.

Validation services in Iceland are well established and known. After 13 years of awareness raising, expanding access points into education and career development, VPL services are accessible. Validation services are well established and known, accessible and have multiple strategies. However certain subgroups such as migrants were not seeking VPL services. Those who did were bi-lingual so didn't require extra services. Traditional awareness and access strategies didn't work in contacting the

migrant group. General awareness raising essential surrounding VPL and also public discussion about validation. Important to consider the economic advantage of VPL and people not starting from scratch.

The CAEs in Flanders, offering the course of AGE, believe that adult learners in their search for opportunities to obtain a Diploma of Secondary education, are less frequently referred to the CAEs by referral authorities. Adult learners themselves will more quickly turn to or be referred to the Examination Board of Secondary Education, which functions as a certification institute, with no education possibility. Low qualified people do not always know the existence and the opportunities and chances a CAE can offer them.

Information and dissemination strategies

Overview

Networking was successfully used in Norway to spread the information and developments of VISKA, contacts have been made and a basis for further cooperation has been established through the work of the project. The five counties hosting Integration Reception Centres have been strongly involved from the inception of the project and this has been fundamental in driving the required changes locally, regionally and nationally. A much broader dissemination strategy had to be used to reach the target audience in Iceland. Information about the exemption tests varies hugely within the CAEs in Flanders. The greatest advantage of a more transparent communication by all VPL providers is less ambiguity and clarity for the applicants.

Strengths and achievements

It was useful for the county (regional) education authorities to get to know more about the competences that refugees bring with them and how this can be used as a basis for completing vocational education and training (VET) in Norway. In addition to the education opportunities which can emerge from competence identification, there is also the opportunity to make the competence of asylum seekers visible to businesses/companies regardless of language differences. This facilitates faster integration into the workplace of the particular learner group.

VPL has probably become more visible for staff working directly with the target group. That initial assessment and support takes place at an early stage and thereby provides realistic information about the possibilities and opportunities in the short and in the long term.

The VISKA project could provide a really exciting impetus for developments in this space as possible policy development are considered. The positive experience of providing VPL early in an integration pathway could be very useful elsewhere in Europe where there is an influx of refugees.

The general ideas of early intervention, using interpreters and other elements from the Norwegian context could be transferable in the European dimension.

It was a holistic approach that caught the attention of stakeholder and other interested parties including local and national authorities in Iceland. It did not impact the participant/learner engagement as hoped for at the beginning of the project. VISKA did, however, capture the interest of policy makers. It is suggested that VISKA may influence educational policy for migrants in the upcoming parliamentary resolution for migrants 2020-2024 set forth by the Ministry of Welfare in Iceland.

The feeling that candidates do not always end up in the most appropriate institution in Flanders has led to a consideration of the potential of 'independent one stop learner shops' directed to the most convenient provider of VPL for educational qualifications. Future development is dependent on the willingness of the CAEs to revise their websites so it will lead to a better 'access to and awareness of' for candidates and referral authorities.

Challenge and barriers

A number of challenges were identified across VISKA which influence the ability to engage with the various target audiences in a considered way. To change any system funding and resourcing are required to drive change. Language and cultural differences present an additional barrier in accessing the target groups and the requirement that VPL assessment is conducted in the native language of the various countries limit the possibilities within validation. In VISKA, the translation of marketing material into languages more accessible to the target group and the availability of translators added to the complexity of the system. It was found in Iceland that translation of documents did not necessarily result in a clear or accurate communication or understanding. The impact of policy changes in national systems in Flanders on validation were still unclear and require clarification before a more considered future pathway is identified. A significant future national challenge in Iceland was also identified in how migrants are received into the formal school system after VPL processes.

Key Findings

In Norway, according to the current national regulations, people in the VISKA target group had no access to VPL due to language requirements during the VISKA trials, the counties providing VPL were exempted from these requirements and were able to use interpreters supporting the process. Professional staff involved in VISKA report on positive experiences and recommend this early use of VPL as a way of creating more targeted learning trajectories for this target group.

In Iceland, migrants are not aware of VPL services as was evident in the efforts required during VISKA and do not benefit in the same manner as nationals from VPL due to their standing towards the Icelandic language. In general, interpretation during VPL services are not free of charge (this does not pertain to VISKA).

Upper secondary schools are willing to accept migrants; however, they do not have the means, funding or system in place to accept migrants in the capacity that VPL services could deliver and therefore access into the formal school's system is limited.

In Flanders, all stakeholders agreed that there is still a lot of margin to improve a better awareness of and access to and better communication about VPL for educational qualifications in the sector of adult education. an 'independent one stop learner shop' can increase the visibility of the CAEs, as the 'learner shops' are professionalised in referring the target group to the most appropriate learning facility.

In general, each national context identified the changes and investment required for validation to be fully integrated and available to the target groups of VISKA within each national context which requires careful consideration before communication. This informs other European countries of the importance of decisions surrounding the broader system before communicating about validation.

Key implications

The existence of a uniform framework and use of a common definition and vision on VPL is necessary to communicate in a strong way and to improve the access to and the awareness on VPL. When participants/learners enter the validation process they have expectations to be able to finish their education based on their validation results but might not have the language skills required or the system is not structured to enable their progression through the current system. The VISKA project has not been able to deliver on this aspect as it incorporates other national policy and procedures which are outside of the focus of VISKA.

Implications for future validation process development

In Norway and Iceland, if national regulations are amended to give access to VPL and progression opportunities for the target groups of VISKA, increased awareness of this provision among the target group and among surrounding stakeholders is necessary.

In Flanders, building a consensus on how it should be implemented within CAEs will enable a consistent communication to be streamlined within the broader Flemish context and would enhance the visibility across the Federation for SCE and the CAEs offering AGE programmes.

Implications of policy

The political climate in Norway and Iceland is currently open to the needs of the target groups and the economic contribution they can make to the countries in which they currently reside. The financial requirements to embed policies and practices of validation are also receptive due to this reason.

The lack of consistency and a uniform framework within Flanders makes progress challenging.

Implications for policy

In advance of considering access to and awareness of validation services, the policies and systems which underpin the process require amendment as was outlined in each of the national reports of VISKA and in the preceding chapters. In entering a validation process a level of expectation is created with the particular candidate that further opportunities and pathways will be available to them. As was identified in each of the country contexts of VISKA this is not the case and the realisation that in addressing validation a broader view must be taken as to the pre and post validation phases.

Low-Skilled, Migrant and Refugee outcomes

Over the course of the project, data has been collected from the participants at several stages. This includes information on educational attainments, attitude to validation or guidance as well as motivations for seeking validation. This chapter summarises the perspectives of the learner group as to the benefit of validation and also suggested amendments to ensure further success in implementing validation arrangements.

Satisfaction of validation process/service

Generally, over the VISKA project participants were satisfied with the process and support they received through the field trials. Challenges did emerge post validation as the expected progression pathways were not available or open to migrants and refugees. A level of expectation had been created through VISKA however the maturity of the broader system was not as advanced as required. This was key learning for VISKA partners as the validation process was viewed as the vehicle for further opportunities.

Qualitative findings: benefits of validation

Learner perspectives

Overall, it was a very positive experience for the most part, making their skills visible and working with an interpreter was also positive. Some have gone on and used the documentation for application to higher education. One key reflection was that for some they were unable to use the outcome due to their stage in the integration process. It also may not have resulted in transforming their lives or having a visible impact.

The validation process did empower the learner and enabled them to identify the breadth and depth of learning which they have.

Validation staff perspectives

Most candidates felt they got to show and express their competences, and some candidates had hoped for better results from their validation. In relation to the readiness of the participants, some VPL professionals commented that the candidate should have been given more time to prepare and should have been given necessary information and the opportunity to study the curriculum before the VPL procedure. Understanding the national education and employment environments was also mentioned.

Other stakeholders (NAG and network)

The National Advisory Groups and other networks could see the impact of validation for the target groups and the changes required in national legal systems to support the learner going forward.

Key findings

The benefits to the participants of validation include guidance and counselling which build their confidence and self-esteem through helping to identify competencies. Many of the candidates and staff involved in VISKA emphasised this impact. Being a refugee in a completely foreign country with a different culture may lead to estrangement and loss of confidence as one's previous position in life is no longer applicable. Many have said that 'being seen' boosts motivation and confidence to take on the challenge of re-entering education or the workplace in a new environment.

Key Outcomes

The VPL process was successful but further consideration is required for the transition from VPL results for migrants and refugees to improved awareness and access to educational pathways and career development.

The stakeholders and the front-line staff unanimous agreed that the benefit of validation is that it is of great value for the learner groups of VISKA.

Strengths and achievements

Strengths and achievements can be summarised as follows;

- increased attention to the candidates' needs and wishes
- visibility and approval of candidates' competences and personal back stories
- increased understanding of the education systems and the possibilities
- personal follow-up and support in manoeuvring in the system
- opportunities for faster transitions through shortened learning pathways

Behind these achievements lie the collaborative efforts of local staff, supported by high-level policy institutions. In VISKA the interest and dedication of the frontline staff was an essential element for success.

Challenges and barriers

Candidates need sufficient time to get the information and orientation necessary to profit from the VPL process; this also includes time to support reflection on options available to them and making informed decisions; to have time to discuss expectations and understand which goals are realistic in the local, regional and national setting.

Guidance counsellors involved in VISKA have emphasised the importance of time in these processes, which for a newly arrived refugee can be quite overwhelming.

Language difficulties were also a challenge that may have led to the misunderstanding or mistranslation of competencies. The identification of the next steps after validation were also a challenge for all stakeholders involved in the validation process and for some highlighted the barriers for future opportunities in their new settings.

Key Implications

These particular target groups have specific challenges; meaning they may require much more support and guidance than other groups. An option to lengthen the processes if needs be is necessary and to factor in the pre and post validation phases.

Implication for future validation process development

It takes time for refugees and migrants to understand the system in their new country. Systems and processes such as VPL may be quite complicated to understand as it is a process closely linked to education and employments system of countries. Also, time is required to understand the competence requirements for stable employment in working life, and how these requirements are mostly based on formal documentation. The challenge for national systems is how to support those who may not have access to formal documentation to access the same opportunities available for all citizens of a country. Having appropriate guidance available to them is a necessity for them to persist.

Policy Implications

When developing possible trajectories for refugees, migrants and low-skilled it is advisable to take into account the need for time and support, which may be more extensive than initially anticipated for these groups.

Implications of policy

The current policies in each of the national contexts is not adequate to support the future and further development of each of the learner groups. The needs of the low-skilled in the Flemish context are possibly less complex to resolve than those in Norway, Iceland and Ireland however having a regulated system with enforceable guidelines and external quality control would greatly enhance the system in Flanders. The need for individualised support for each candidate through guidance was identified in each context and highlights the unforeseen challenges that individuals experience as they attempt to navigate their way through legal standards and systems.

Implications for policy

Future legal VPL provisions for these target groups need to include sufficient support to make sure the candidate gets maximum output from their validation process and consequently more targeted future plans for further education and work.

In Flanders, there should be a full-fledged VPL procedure for educational qualifications, which enhances the quality of the procedure, bringing the policy of the CAE on VPL in line with the European efforts and development on VPL. A system which would encompass partial certification through exemption tests would increase the possibilities for those with prior learning but who will need to complete some modules in the more traditional way.

Conclusions: answering the evaluation questions

Four research questions underpinned the VISKA evaluation.

- **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?**
- **What outcomes were achieved for what groups, and to what degree?**
- **What factors were associated with the achievement of positive learner outcomes?**
- **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?

The five intervention strategies of VISKA served to structure key elements considered important in the context of validation. As clearly stated in the initial project proposal not all partners intended to implement the strategies consistently in their local, regional and national contexts as they did not align with the existing systems, structures and policies of the country. All partners did succeed in implementing a validation process for the intended participants and were able to identify how the challenges, which emerged during the project, could be overcome through additional funding, support and policy. Across the VISKA project the contribution of the National Advisory Group and the collaboration with networks was key in securing the opportunities and way forward in validation. These networks provided the opportunity to communicate openly across and within systems and to find solutions to issues which emerged during the implementation phase of the project. They also served to working towards more permanent solutions to validation for the participant groups. The composition of the networks within each national context was fundamental as having the right people who could influence, make recommendations or drive changes to the systems, processes and policies was essential.

What outcomes were achieved for what groups, and to what degree?

All participants in each of the national contexts went through at least two stages of the validation process as outlined in the EC Recommendation 2012. In Norway, a much larger learner cohort went through the process than initially intended and potential opportunities were identified in employment and education. There were some challenges regarding language, which were amended in January 2020

in terms of validation in other languages than Norwegian and Sami. This was an achievement to secure within the timeframe of the project, but additional challenges are now emerging in the formal education systems and their ability to adequately support the language needs of this new learner group. In Iceland, most of the learners went through the four stages of validation but again the next steps were the challenge in terms of future and further opportunities. Additional financial supports were identified as being required to develop the competence of interpreters and of staff in working with interpreters. In Flanders, a larger number than initially intended engaged with the validation process, there was a question about the availability of guidance to this cohort in advance of pursuing a programme of study to reduce the drop-out rate by those who had signed up with different expectations. In the Irish context, engagement with the EU Skills Profiling tool was done independent of any broader validation process so it is difficult to conclude on what outcomes were achieved aside from participants identifying the range of competence they have.

What factors were associated with the achievement of positive learner outcomes?

The importance of guidance and front-line staff and the personal touch in working with vulnerable participants emerged as a key factor associated with the achievement of positive learner outcomes.

What policy-level factors were associated with the achievement of positive learner outcomes?

The possibility of validation in Norway through other languages contributed to the positive learner outcomes in that context. The identification of what policies require amendment to enable validation and future opportunities were an additional positive outcome.

Implications and Recommendations for future validation process development

Through the intervention strategies and field trials, implications for validation process development emerged. Across all partner countries the need for future investment in the services that support validation were identified. These services include guidance, front-line staff and interpreters and the general capacity of the system to support all learners to seek validation for their learning. The pre and post validation systems emerged as important stages that require integration into a validation process. It was evident that participants were ill prepared mentally and physically to go through the validation process and would have benefitted from additional consultation and time to consider their options in a pre-validation stage. The opportunities post validation were also underdeveloped or only available for particular learners. A key recommendation from VISKA is that those two additional stages should be added to the four stages of validation in order to develop a comprehensive process.

Policy implications and recommendations

Through VISKA two laws, one parliamentary resolution, two regulations, one strategy and one decree in the areas of adult education, school education and immigrant laws were identified as requiring

amendments to further support validation for low-skilled, migrants and refugees. The diversity of the legal systems indicates the complexity associated with different learner groups whose pathways are determined by a myriad of regulations and laws. Laws pertaining to changes in language requirements and creating an equitable system for all learners emerged as the key focus of VISKA.

Recommendations for future validation development at an EU level

Through the VISKA project several local, regional and national aspects were identified requiring amendment to realise a more coherent, consistent and considered validation system in each of the partner countries. Amendments to local, regional and national processes and policies were identified and detailed regarding changes required. Underpinning all of these changes was a more challenging and difficult aspect which was hard to specify or outline and even harder to clearly articulate on how it could be changed. This is the culture and openness of a country to validation. Beyond the identification of particular laws, regulations and decrees requiring amendment is the need for validation to become part of the ethos and culture of society so that all learning regardless of origin is valued through new, existing, adapted or enhanced quality assured systems and processes.