Quality Assurance Mechanism of Validation Services

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Contents

D.5.3 Quality Assurance Mechanism of Validation Services

Introduction

This report will give an overview on quality assurance considerations within the VISKA project and various mechanisms in place within each country context and EU synergies. This will potentially allow further alignment of quality assurance to further support validation of prior learning, both at a national and European level.

This will be done by reviewing two VISKA reports and lessons learnt from the field trials. The reports are D.3.4 - *Holistic Quality Assurance Measures of Validation Services* and *Country reports* that feeds into D.5.2 – *Comparative Report on final results of VISKA 3 – country field trial*. The VISKA deliverable 3.4 was grounded on national, Nordic and European guidelines on Validation of prior learning[1]. These deliverables can be found on the project website: www.viskaproject.eu

This assignment will describe quality assurance measures grounded in a national context, VISKA context and EU context, describing similarities and differences between the different quality assurance mechanisms that are underpinned by the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning.

The concept of quality assurance

The term quality assurance can be defined as a set of actions that determine procedures and standards.

It is stated in the European guidelines for validating non- formal and informal learning[2] that validation of prior learning is at its core about making individuals' skills and competences visible, valued, validated and recognised. Certain processes must be in place to bring this about. These processes need to be founded in trust, underpinned by defined requirements of reliability and validity, and a certainty that quality assurance has been met.

The following VISKA quality standards were set forth in D.3.4: Accessibility, transparency, assessment, right of the individual, professionalism and **quality assurance**. The quality standards are shown in Annex 1.

Development of a "set of quality assurance standards" in the VISKA project

According to the before mentioned European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning, it is recommended that member states assure that reliable quality assurance measures exist that support a valid and credible assessment methodology.

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[1] https://nvl.org/Content/Guidance-in-validation-within-the-Nordic-region/
https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory / https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Quality-in-Validation-of-Prior-Learning-%3A-from-Work-Andersson-Halttunen/a261325b7b9bef9c64a930337bda51ba50b7c4f2 /
https://www.norden.org/en/publication/validation-and-value-competences-road-map-2018
[2] https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/3073_en.pdf

In the VISKA context, a quality assurance criterion was developed focusing on quality factors of the validation processes. The criteria were tried out in the project field and described in the country context here below. The deliverable was adjustable and with the potential to be used in other validation contexts by various stakeholders involved in planning and conducting validation measures. To further support quality issues on policy level the Roadmap 2018[3] developed by the Nordic network for adult learning (NVL) could have been applied.

For quality assurance to function, it is crucial to set up a system focusing on evaluation, review of findings and further quality improvement based on results. Following the flow of the quality cycle (www.eqavet.eu) with set dates on regular quality assurance activities is recommended.

In order to approach the development of a set of quality assurance standards which can be applied universally (not context specific) to measure the quality of validation services, the VISKA partnership has embedded systematic quality assurance measurers as explained in D3.4. However, the aim was to produce a practical list of standards which can be the basis for further development of quality assurance systems in various contexts. Based on mapping of various quality factors and an existing tool called Quality kit for VPL (coordinated by The agency for Higher Education, Adult Education, Qualifications and Study Grants, in Belgium-Flanders), a set of quality assurance standards were identified under the heading; **Quality standards** (see Annex 1).

Iceland

The validation system (for people with low-qualified background) in Iceland is set in legislation and coordinated nationally by a specific body[4], ETSC, and is underpinned by The European guidelines for validating non- formal and informal learning and Nordic guidelines developed by the Nordic network for adult learning (NVL). These elements sustain quality assurance measures, and all VPL providers must be accredited through a specific quality assurance system (EQM – European Quality Mark). The organisation of VPL in Iceland is linked to the national qualification system and frameworks, thus further embedding quality assurance. The field trials in Iceland targeted migrants (N=51), testing VPL procedures towards national curricula in vocational education. In addition, VPL was tested with migrants towards job standards and Transversal skills. Validating towards job standards and Transversal skills is currently in an initial stage and is not as mainstream as validating towards national curricula. Linking validation to national frameworks and qualifications strengthens quality assurance measures. Connecting validation further to the labour market would strengthen the position of validation towards job standards and transversal skills.

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Lessons from the field provided an overview of areas that need further attention in order to develop quality assurance systems further. The main lessons learnt in the Icelandic case are the following: It was resource intensive to recruit migrants into the VISKA project. It is important to provide information about VPL opportunities in a relaxed environment that encourages questions, therefore outreach measures and recruitment need to aim at providing clear information and encouragement. Frontline staff needs to be competent in meeting the needs of migrants who may not have a clear understanding of the national educational system, in addition to language barriers. The role and competences of interpreters and translation services is the key to a successful validation process and

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[3] https://nvl.org/Content/Validation-and-the-value-of-competences-Road-Map-2018

[4] https://frae.is/

should be developed further. Two main weaknesses were defined, first the lack of interpreter's professional vocabulary and secondly finding the right interpreter to work with the counsellors and assessors. Informational material (such as Power point slides) should be kept to minimum and should entail more pictures than text. Though a cultural awareness training course was developed as a result of VISKA, enhancing the competences of frontline staff as regards cultural awareness and working with interpreters should be further developed. The aim and benefits of VPL need to be clear and a migrant´ need to get clear information about the educational system and how to navigate through the system after VPL. In that transition, access to language support during studies is of high importance. There is no systematic procedure on how to receive migrants (non- Icelandic speaking) into the formal school system nor provide career development after VPL in Iceland for migrants.

Norway

Validation of prior learning for adults in Norway is set in legislation and coordinated nationally by a specific body[5]. As in Iceland the VPL principles are underpinned by The European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning and Nordic guidelines developed by the Nordic network for adult learning. These elements sustain quality assurance measures. In the validation system in Norway, prior learning is validated against learning outcomes defined in the national qualification system and frameworks, thus further embedding quality assurance. The field trials in Norway targeted refugees seeking or in the processes of being granted asylum and residence permits. Most of the group completed (n=612) the first two phases of the VPL and a total of 74 were assessed towards national curricula in upper secondary education. Linking validation to national frameworks and qualifications strengthens quality assurance measures.

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Lessons from the field provided an overview of areas that need further attention in order to develop quality assurance systems further. The main lessons learnt in the Norwegian case are the following: Elimination of sectorial obstacles early in the process is important. Working with this target group was resource intensive and should be considered in further developing quality standards. Working with and finding the right interpreters as well as matching participants backgrounds to national learning outcomes was at times challenging. Interpretation and counselling in VPL need a lot of preparation, the main weakness in regards with the interpretation was some interpreter's lack of professional vocabulary. Information provided to the participants could have been in some cases clearer and the time factor is something that should be taken into consideration. A recent immigrant in a new country needs time to understand the system around validation, both the education system and the requirements in the labour market, to be able to benefit fully from the procedure.   Follow-up of participants was difficult. Clearer pathways to employment and further training should be in place. The trials confirmed that it is possible to apply VPL processes to a new target group. However, language proficiency, for the candidate to enter the labour market or educational system, will still be an obstacle that has to be dealt with for the candidate to be able to complete education and get a robust connection to the labour market. Relevant job training, based on VPL results, with integrated language training might be a good solution to reach these goals.

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[5] https://www.kompetansenorge.no/English/Validation-of-prior-learning/

Belgium/Flanders

Validation of prior learning in Belgium/Flanders is decentralized[6]. Education, welfare and other areas are the responsibility of the communities in Belgium, i.e. Flemish, German and French. The Department of Education and training (DET) is responsible of Validation in education in Belgium/Flanders. VISKA was executed for the Flemish community. Legislation grants institutions both autonomy and responsibility to organise validation processes. Most of the frontline staff involved in the VISKA project in Flanders agreed on the importance of a unified quality assurance approach, coordinated by the government administration in cooperation with a working group of practitioners. Through VISKA the Federation of SCE has recognised the necessity of further steps to enhance quality assurance in the process, including the assessment materials. As in Iceland and Norway the VPL principals are underpinned by The European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning, and these elements sustain quality assurance measures. In the validation system in Belgium/Flanders, prior learning is validated against learning outcomes defined in the national qualification system and frameworks, thus further embedding quality assurance. The field trials in Belgium/Flanders targeted low-qualified adults, sufficiently familiar with the Dutch language in order to have a fair chance to succeed. 474 individuals completed the first three phases of the VPL process and were assessed towards the national curricula of the course of AGE (which leads, in combination with a certificate of a professional qualification, to a diploma of upper secondary education. A total of 81 received a certificate of the course of AGE and therefore completed all four phases of the validation process. Linking validation to national frameworks and qualifications thus strengthening quality assurance measures.

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Lessons from the field provided an overview of areas that need further attention in order to develop quality assurance systems further. The main lessons learnt in the Belgium/Flemish case are the following: The different centres agreed that it would benefit the VPL process to implement a unified quality assurance approach. It was pointed out that a professionalisation policy on all aspects of the VPL processes based on a common vision would be beneficial, including a clarification on different roles within the system. As mentioned before, the BE/Flanders target group were low skilled adults who are sufficiently familiar with the Dutch language nationals and therefore were not faced with the same language barriers as is Norway and Iceland; however, practitioners they do point out that further training for frontline staff is necessary.

Ireland

Validation of prior learning or recognition of prior learning as it is more often referred to in Ireland is set in legislation[7]. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is an independent state agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training in Ireland. QQI sets out core quality assurance guidelines and other tools. In VISKA the main focus in Ireland was to work on VPL questions in a national and European context with a National advisory board; in addition, to test and report on the usefulness of EU skills profiling tool[8] in several Educational centres. Ireland's qualification framework is linked to validation thus strengthens quality assurance measures.

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[6] https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl
[7] https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/recognition-of-Prior-Learning-RPL.aspx
[8] https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1412

Lessons from the field provided an overview of areas that need further attention in order to develop quality assurance systems further. The main lessons learnt in the Irish case are the following: Discussions held with the members of the VISKA National advisory board gave insight into practitioner's commitment on ways on improving validation policy, practice and experience for learners. Concerns in regards with cultural sensitivity in engagement and the design of any material must be examined. This also includes the training of frontline staff, guidance councillors and any other practitioners when working with diverse groups. Even practical issues such as working with translators and interpretation of materials need special attention. As to date validation services in Ireland do not bear the cost for cultural diversity training thus missing the opportunity to bridge and acknowledge competences from a wider audience. The main aim nationally in regards with the VISKA interventions was to gain mutual understanding and exchange practices, benefiting policy and practice from different perspectives. The work has influenced training centres nationwide in reflective practice in quality assurance, reviewing and developing validation toolkits to comply with diversity on a local, regional and national level.

Europe

Quality assurance according to the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning states that quality assurance in validation must be a systematic, continued and integrated part of a defined process. This calls for an agreed quality strategy. Feedback from users and beneficiaries should be easily implemented. Transparency is of great importance if quality assurance is to be credible. Quality assurance must be fit for purpose. Trust, safety and confidentiality must be at the core and in a consistent process.

The VISKA partners have been true to the core vision of validation. Quality assurance measures built on European principles are at the forefront but adapted to national context. Quality assurance issues noticed in the VISKA field trials that need further attention are described in the countries' lessons learnt. Some of these issues can be dealt with at an organisational level whereas others must be addressed at policy level.

Final words

The VISKA project has proven that the partner members have advanced quality assurance processes. There are however inadequacies in some procedures and tasks that will be addressed through quality improvement within the partner countries. Findings from the Belgium/Flanders case show that there is a need for a unified qualification framework as regards validation processes. Iceland and Norway found that quality issues as regards the role and competences of interpreters need special attentions as did Ireland which calls for a continuous professional development framework for practitioners. Ireland also raised concerns over cultural sensitivity and design of materials. Ireland and the other partners imply that additional funding will be needed to address diversity in VPL services. All partners found that though VPL is embedded in the educational system, there are target groups, especially migrants and refugees that have limited access to national systems, and that they lack understanding/awareness of what VPL entails.

When examining D5.2 it is evident that Belgium/Flanders discussed quality assurance matters in greater detail than the other partner countries. This may be due to the fact that the other partner countries have established centralized quality assurance mechanisms for validation processes and to

the emphasis within the project reports. The partners are very much aware of quality assurance mechanisms in VPL and applied them in their own country context and are influenced by European guidelines[9].

The awareness of validation across Europe is varied and even more so amongst the low-qualified, 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. It is therefore recommended that countries investigate their national quality assurance systems and mechanisms to explore if they are fit for purpose. Validation of non-formal and informal learning must be transparent and credible both nationally and internationally, enabling individuals to move freely to seek work and education and have their skills and competences taken into consideration. High-quality validation procedures are the foundation for fairer and more transparent recognition of skills and competences. Therefore, special attention must be given to quality of access of validation services thus ensuring awareness for all.

Below is an example of how the quality assurance standards see Annex 1.

Annex 1 – List of Quality standards

	Quality standard	In place	Not sufficient	Comments
1.	**Accessibility**			
1.1	Information about the VPL procedure and pathways is clear, complete and publicly visible/available			
1.2	Outreach measures are in place focusing on reaching specific target groups (introducing validation possibilities)			
1.3	The set-up, coordination and financing of the VPL pathway is clear and secure			
1.4	It is clear how, where and whom the participant contacts in order to receive guidance regarding validation possibilities			
1.5	The requirements to participate in the different phases of the VPL procedure are clearly defined			
1.6	The costs to participate in the VPL procedure are transparent and known in advance			
1.7	The learning outcomes/competencies that will be assessed are available to the potential participant			
1.8	The guidelines and criteria for the preparation of a dossier (portfolio, competence folder – e.g. Europass ...) are clear and available on time for the participant			

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[9] https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/4054

1.9	The participant receives guidance in identifying, and documenting competences as well as the collection and organization of evidence (portfolio, comp. folder)			
1.10	The provider ensures eliminating barriers so that eligible candidates can participate (financial, discrimination, accessibility, opening hours, disability, etc.)			
2.	**Transparency**			
2.1	The purpose of the VPL procedure is clearly defined (access to job or studies, exemption, study length shortening, certificate, qualification, ...)			
2.2	The progress of the procedure is transparent and known by the participant before the start of the procedure (4 phased validation)			
2.3	The time-schedule for the procedure is realistic, feasible and known in advance			
2.4	The way in which participants are assessed is transparent and known in advance			
2.5	The criteria of the evidence are clear and known in advance (authenticity, actuality, relevance, quantity, variation in contexts)			
2.6	The competencies that will be assessed are known by the applicant before the start of the assessment			
2.7	The standards used are linked to the National Qualification System (if the context allows)			
2.8	The decision-making processes are clear and known in advance *(e.g. consensus, assessment conclusions, how results are documented etc.)*			
2.9	The results of the procedure are presented clearly *(explains the relationship between the competencies of the participant and the standard)*			
2.10	On the VPL-confirmation (certificate) that the participant receives at the end of the procedure, at least the competencies of the participant are mentioned in relation to the standards, the date of assessment, as well as the required information determined by the decree.			

2.11	The participant can receive additional information or get feedback on the results of the procedure at any point in time.			
2.12	The participant will get accurate information and guidance about his/her opportunities after finishing the VPL procedure and shall, if necessary, referred towards further competence development.			
2.13	The role and qualifications/competences required of all validation staff are clearly described *(supervisor, assessor, advisor/counsellor, administration, coordinator, etc...)*			
3.	**Assessment**			
3.1	The assessment methods used are suitable for the testing of the respective competencies *(independent of the learning route),* and the needs of the candidate			
3.2	The applied assessment methodologies and instruments are valid (measuring what they need to measure)			
3.3	The assessment methodologies and instruments used are reliable (give repeatedly in the same conditions the same outcomes, are not liable to coincidence)			
3.4	Each competency is tested adequately in order to reach a reliable conclusion *(on several occasions, mix of methods, etc...)*			
3.5	The competencies that will be reviewed are current and validated			
3.6	Each competency is assessed through reliable methods based on the participant's needs and learning style			
3.7	The independence and impartiality of the assessors is ensured *(conflict avoidance)*			
3.8	The assessors are professionals in the competencies that will be assessed			
3.9	The assessors are working in the field of adult education and training or in the sector at hand (recognized by stakeholders linked to standards used)			
3.11	Within a VPL procedure, the assessment procedure and criteria are the same for all participants			
4.	**Rights of the individual**			

4.1	Participation in the VPL procedure is voluntary and may be terminated at any time by the candidate			
4.2	The inserted original evidence is owned by the participant and is treated in a confidential manner			
4.3	The VPL proof is owned by the participant			
4.4	The participant is informed in advance about the complaints and appeal procedure			
4.5	The privacy and personal integrity of the participant is guaranteed			
4.6	The information collected within the VPL procedure is not passed to persons that are not part of the VPL procedure, unless the participant gives his/her written consent			
4.7	The participant has the right to see his VPL file and, if necessary, to change his personal data			
4.8	The participant will be informed - within a reasonable time, known in advance - about the results of the validation procedure			
4.9	Candidates in the VPL procedure are not obliged to enter any follow-up program that the organization offers (training, career guidance, job placement, etc.)			
5. **Professionalism**				
5.1	VPL procedures/projects are developed in consultation with all stakeholders and widely supported within the organization			
5.2	Functions and qualifications/competences are correctly and professionally executed by all involved *(supervisor, assessor, administration, advisor/counsellors, coordinator, ...)*			
5.3	The roles of guidance counsellor and assessor are separated and clearly defined			
5.4	Guidance counsellors and assessors are professionals with the right skills for the job			
5.5	Guidance counsellors and assessors stay up to date in their skills			
5.6	Guidance counsellors and assessors go through appropriate training in VPL procedures			

5.7	Guidance counsellors and assessors working in a VPL procedure follow ethical codes *(no discrimination, professional secrecy, confidentiality…)*			
6.	**Quality assurance**			
6.1	The evaluation of the VPL procedure is structurally embedded in the quality management system of the Organization			
6.2	All components of the VPL procedure are regularly evaluated			
6.3	All relevant actors are involved in the evaluation *(participant, guidance counsellor, assessor, working life, training providers,...)*			
6.4	There is an accessible complaint and appeal procedure in place			
6.5	The data from the complaints and appeal procedure will be included in the evaluation			
6.6	There is a transparent and up to date registration system in which all the relevant information about the results and stages are included, in line with European data protection regulations.			
6.7	The effect of VPL for the participant is followed up and evaluated *(employment opportunities, training results, etc...)*			
6.8	An improvement policy is formulated and implemented, based on the results of the evaluation			
6.9	There is a strategic communication policy on the VPL offer so that the intended audience is reached			
6.10	Relevant customers of VPL (sectors, employers, training providers) are involved in the VPL policies of the provider			
6.11	Evaluation of VPL measures are conducted regularly, results documented, and improvement plan followed			