

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 including variations in:
 - Target cohort for the project intervention –influenced by the policy aim and environment
 - Target cohort size
 - Economic and social imperatives for the project
 - Legislative and regulatory framework for VPL
- The project partners in each country 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 the research and evaluation.

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

As indicated in the proposal document it was not anticipated that an experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation could be achieved, nor indeed might it be desirable in the circumstances. It was clear at the proposal stage that the identified target cohorts for the interventions would not

be a representative sample of the available population subgroup within the country but would be chosen with reference to economic imperatives, skills gaps, accessibility, willingness and coherence. Indeed, it was also clear that these imperatives might change during the course of the project.

A (modified) **Realist Evaluation** approach 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 focuses on the collection of rich information around the practice setting which contributed to the later extraction of value in the policy domain. This interplay between the contexts and the actions came to the fore throughout the project. As propounded by Pawson and Tilley¹ – the question in Realist Evaluations is: *What works, for whom and in what circumstances?* Generally, a realist programme theory specifies which mechanisms (changes or interventions in our case) will enervatethe outcomes and what features of the context will affect whether or not those mechanisms work to achieve a desired or anticipated result. Ideally, these elements (mechanisms, outcome, context) are reflected on at the evaluation design stage, as it enables to design the data collection to focus on testing the different elements of the programme theory.

In adopting the Realist Evaluation approach, the VISKA project team considered the relevant aspects of the context such as the legislative and regulatory setting, the views of the stakeholders of the Viska project as well as conducting a pre-trial SWOT analysis across the five interventions. The interventions had been agreed by the project team at the proposal stage with a view to the desired outcomes and the research methods include collection of both qualitative and quantitative data sets. Realist evaluation provides a structure to explore change brought about by an intervention by referring to the actors who act and change (or not) a situation under specific conditions and under the influence of external events (including the intervention itself). In the VISKA project, the project partners were embedded in the social reality of their particular context and that influenced how the 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 has leveraged the experience of JD Carpentieri -through a subcontracting arrangement -whose expertise in the design of interventions, deployment of field trials and research and evaluation frameworks for the ongoing *Guidance and Orientation Pilots for Adult Learners* (GOAL) project 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

¹ Pawson, R., & Tilley, N. (1997). Evaluation. Sage

partners of the GOAL project so their expertise in 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 Realistic 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. 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 will be generally in line with the aims of the participant country at the time of the project proposal. However, the findings and conclusions of the project 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 include:

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

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 be 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 2019². 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.

² Interim key findings are available <https://viskaproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/D5.1-Final-document.pdf>

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.

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 21/29
	Front Line Staff	5
	Policy Makers	
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.