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Cross-country report - Executive summary

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Contents

Executive Summary.....	2
About the VISKA project	2
About the VISKA evaluation.....	3
Programme Candidates	3
The VISKA Validation process	4
Findings: intervention strategies	5
<i>Developing and extending networks and partnerships.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Validation tools and Quality Assurance</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Documentation and assessment of transversal skills</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Training and capacity building of front-line and guidance staff.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Access and awareness.....</i>	<i>8</i>
Findings: candidate outcomes	9
Implications for future programme and policy development	10
<i>Influence of organisations, national priorities, societal norms and economic drivers on validation</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Influence of candidate groups on validation.....</i>	<i>11</i>

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 country 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-qualified adults, migrants¹, asylum seekers² and refugees³ 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
- **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

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ 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)

- 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 Profiling tool took place in Ireland. 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

Flanders: 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, 55 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.

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 a 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.

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, skill 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, skill 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 mis-interpretation.

Documentation and assessment of transversal skills

A document regarding transversal skills was 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 skills 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.

While all country partners contributed to the general considerations, this intervention in relation to transversal skills was only conducted in Iceland who further extended the transversal skills list to include skills which they felt were relevant within their own context and to 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 is to provide 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. 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.

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 Belgium Flanders, there is established practice; however, participation by Centres of Adult Education is voluntary and not regulated. 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, Iceland and Ireland, the target groups can be considered as marginalised and lacking in access to central national 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 holistically by 32 candidates in Ireland, and for 1425⁴ successful applications against specified standards of modules, trade standards and learning outcomes in Norway, Iceland and Belgium 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

⁴ This number refers to the total number of applications for validation in the field trials of VISKA. Multiple applications were made by some candidates.

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 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 and Iceland 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 heterogenous 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.