



**Eva Anslinger, Bodil Lomholt Husted, Franziska Laudenbach,
Aleksandra Lis, Özlem Ünlühisarcıklı (Eds.)**

Dimensions of validation of prior learning in Europe

**Empirical insights from Denmark, Poland,
Turkey and Germany**

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Series “Vocational Education, Work and Innovation”

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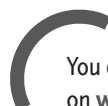
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Preface

BERND GÖSSLING

Prior learning concerns the sensitive issue of assessing what type of human activity counts as learning. In particular, learning that is integrated in everyday life outside educational curricula and correction is regularly met with suspicion, resulting in learning outcomes not being recognised. The lack of recognition of informal learning relates primarily to the formal education and qualification systems. Sometimes resistance to the validation of prior learning (VPL) is maintained even if it complies with the same standards that apply to award qualifications in the formal system. This does not mean that informal learning could replace formal learning or is the 'better' type of learning. Instead, the shift from input- to outcome-based approaches to education, of which VPL is a part, emphasises that the value of learning should not depend on the context in which it took place. This is in light of a great number of scientific studies stressing the significance of non-formal and informal learning. When prior learning is to include "all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective", then it is to be considered that most learning takes place informally over the course of life.

In an effort to strengthen lifelong learning in all forms and areas, European educational policy has fought the actual denial of informal and non-formal learning for a long time. Member states of the European Union are therefore encouraged to offer "individuals the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned outside formal education and training – including through mobility experiences – and to make use of that learning for their careers and further learning, and [...] have in place, no later than 2018 [...] arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning ...".

These recommended validation arrangements are generally endorsed, but not yet well established. Even after several decades of piloting validation procedures, far too many have still not gained recognition for their prior learning results. There are multiple reasons for this, including issues with professionalising assessors and validators in many countries in which VPL is still new, the limited effect of validation, which relies on recognition by institutions of the formal education system and the labour market that it cannot produce solely on its own, and also national VPL policies that are overly guided by compliance with European regulation, rather than focusing on the individual's biography, requirements, aspirations and environment.

Fortunately, the Erasmus+ project "Effectiveness of VPL Policies and Programmes – Individual and Employer Perspectives" (EffectVPL) addressed these issues during the project period from 2017 to 2019. It brought together partners from universities and schools, state authorities and employers as well as numerous participants testing the innovative approaches to VPL. These partners represented four countries,

sharing the common cause to make VPL work in their respective cultural and societal backgrounds in Denmark, Poland, Turkey and Germany.

At the end of the project, the results are being published in this book. I trust that this book, and the project output on which it is based, garners broad attention for the benefit of those who want to see VPL get working in the diverse cases, sectors and regions in Europe for which it was proposed.

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Introduction: The political relevance and practical implications of VPL in Europe

EDITORIAL TEAM

For more than a decade, the European Union (EU) has fostered harmonisation processes in the context of education and employment policies. Within this context, lifelong learning and labour market mobility are closely linked and aim to encourage the effective use of potential, especially among low-skilled and unskilled workers. Of particular interest for this book is the focus on the validation of non-formal and informal competencies gained over the course of a lifetime, which is seen as a means to uncover hidden talents and competencies which are, at best, recognised on the labour market.

The concept of lifelong learning has a decisive influence on the importance attached to learning over the lifespan and the qualifications thereby acquired, which facilitate access to the labour market but also exclude those learning experiences that are not sufficiently recognised. This understanding is reflected in international and national education policies of EU member states and beyond. Lifelong learning promotes the idea that an individual learns throughout their lifetime and in every context of life. Learning is thus no longer limited to formal educational institutions but takes place in a broad, multidimensional context. The question arises as to how informally and non-formally acquired competencies can be made visible. Especially for those with lower formal qualifications, it seems to be of particular importance to record and document all acquired competencies, as – it may be assumed – access to the labour market can be hereby enabled. The EU also sees this validation approach as an opportunity to open up the different education systems of the participating countries and foster mobility in Europe.

Along with European harmonisation processes, existing national approaches to the validation of formal, non-formal and informal competencies are now to be differentiated and, if necessary, new procedures developed and aligned with European standards in the EU member states. The EU Commission in particular is promoting these strategies politically, supported by several recommendations for action, which are ultimately relevant for the member states. The Erasmus+ project “Effectiveness of VPL Policies and Programmes for Labour Market Inclusion and Mobility – Individual and Employer Perspectives” (EffectVPL) also belongs to this context. The project evaluated the advancement and effectiveness of VPL policies and practice in Denmark, Germany, Poland and Turkey in terms of how VPL initiatives benefit the individual. It assessed how the VPL procedures available in the four countries support individuals’ labour market inclusion, their employability and further learning pathways. By introducing biographical perspectives into the validation process and identifying the role of employers for VPL, the project aimed to enhance the effectiveness of VPL practice.

The empirical results led to the development of a training module to help transfer the findings to practitioners in Europe (see also <https://blogs.uni-bremen.de/effectvpl/>).

In the course of this project, the consortium of researchers and practitioners from Denmark, Poland, Turkey and Germany gathered data and mapped findings that might be of interest to other researchers and practitioners in the field. Therefore, we decided to bring together the varying perspectives from the project as well as further VPL experts in order to map dimensions of VPL in Europe. These dimensions are naturally limited to the countries analysed in this book and hence not generalisable. Likewise, the implementation and effect of VPL is always context-related and therefore not easily transferable to other countries. However, the findings described in this book may serve as an inspiration for other countries, policymakers and practitioners alike. To understand the context of validation of prior non-formal and informal learning in European countries, it is necessary to take the political context of the European Union into account, including its ideas for shaping the landscape of employment and education throughout the member states. This will be described in the following sections.

The European context: VPL guidelines and implications

In the context of promoting lifelong learning, which has significantly influenced international and national education policies over the past decades, we can observe a change in how learning and its key processes and elements are understood. The concept of lifelong learning thereby strengthens the idea that an individual continues to learn throughout their lifetime and in every context of life. To take account of this multidimensionality, education policies started to incorporate strategies, programmes and qualification frameworks to support the validation and recognition of competences obtained throughout the lifespan (Bohlinger & Münchhausen, 2011).

In 2008, the European Council and the parliament of the European Union defined recommendations for establishing a European Qualification Framework (EQF) for lifelong learning. This can be regarded as the first step towards promoting non-formal and informal learning more prominently in European policies and at the national level. By emphasising on knowledge, skills and competences, rather than on qualifications, the EQF shifts the focus to learning outcomes. This perspective underpins the idea that qualifications should reflect learning outcomes instead of learning pathways and education programmes (Mikulec, 2017). To advance the coordination of education and training across European countries and make the EU the most competitive and dynamic economic area of the world (as stated in the Lisbon Strategy), one starting point was developing and adopting the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for lifelong learning in 2008. Conceptualised as a translation tool, the EQF seeks to make qualifications obtained in the different European countries comparable to enhance labour market mobility across Europe. Accordingly, the member states are required to develop and adjust their National Qualifications Framework (NQF), thereby observing the eight qualification levels set out by the EQF in terms of the spe-

cific knowledge, skills and competences in relation to the defined learning outcomes for each level (EU, 2008).

In 2009, the Council passed a conclusion that established a strategic framework for the cooperation of the European member states in the field of education, vocational education and training. In this document, lifelong learning also serves as a fundamental principle for learning that takes place in non-formal and informal contexts (European Commission, 2009). As a follow-up, the Council passed a recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning in 2012, requiring all European member states to implement procedures for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in accordance with their national education systems by 2018. This means that, in all EU member states, individuals should have the possibility of having their competences, skills and abilities validated that were gained through non-formal and informal learning. Furthermore, this validation must be the basis for full or partial recognition of a qualification (European Commission, 2012).

The EU's understanding of validation of prior non-formal and informal learning

At the European level, lifelong learning is defined along a threefold division: formal learning, non-formal learning and informal learning. Formal learning takes place in an organised, structured educational environment, usually leading to a certificate or diploma. Non-formal learning takes place in similar contexts, without resulting in a formal qualification certificate. Contrasting the former two, informal learning is based on an open, typically non-structured learning process that takes place in relation to practical activities, including work practice. Informal learning is not thereby understood as a single process, but rather as multiple ways of informal learning. Rogers (2014), for example, defines three kinds of informal learning: self-directed learning, incidental learning and unintentional learning. While self-directed learning is organised by the learner, constituting a conscious way of learning, incidental learning takes place while completing a specific task. The learner typically is not aware of such task-related learning as they focus, in the first place, on successfully completing the task. The related learning occurs as a side effect. Unintentional learning is unplanned and comes about through every day experiences (Rogers, 2014). The challenge for the EU member states lies in finding mechanisms that visualise these three types of learning across education institutions and countries, and giving them a value on the labour market which is generally recognized. To provide such a general understanding of VPL and a coherent strategy that is applicable across European countries, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) developed guidelines for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. According to these guidelines, VPL can be defined as a major tool to make “visible the diverse and rich learning of individuals” that “frequently takes place outside formal education and training [...] and is frequently overlooked and ignored” (Cedefop, 2015, p. 14). Based on the Coun-

cil's recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning of 2012, the guidelines furthermore set out four phases of validation, covering the identification of learning outcomes, the documentation of learning outcomes, the assessment of learning outcomes and finally the certification of the assessed learning outcomes. These phases can appear in varying intensity across the different approaches in the different countries, sectors or settings. Nevertheless, Cedefop recommends these phases as indispensable for a comprehensive and sustainable validation process. In addition, Cedefop urges the member states to implement validation procedures that are transparent and clear to facilitate the allocation of the individual's demands to the suitable validation procedure (Cedefop, 2015, p. 15). Accordingly, the guidelines underline the necessity of placing the individual and their needs at the centre of validation procedures (Cedefop, 2015, p. 19).

This anthology comprises two broader parts, each including several chapters: part one is devoted to theoretical dimensions of VPL, whereas the second part addresses empirical dimensions of VPL. Each article will be introduced briefly, allowing the reader to choose and read individual contributions according to their interest.

The first contribution by **Henning Salling Olesen, Bodil Lomholt Husted and Kirsten Aagaard** provides an introduction to the connections between life experience, competence development and (lifelong) learning. The authors address the contradiction between a normal biographical understanding of learning and the demands of accelerating social development. At the same time, however, they criticise the narrowing of the concept of lifelong learning to an individual's working life and assume that learning is an important component for all areas of life. They therefore advocate a broader concept of individual competency development, which involves every kind of learning during the lifetime. The basis of this concept is life history experience, which is to be used as a starting point for competency assessment and subsequently expanded through targeted learning opportunities. The authors then take up a more theoretical, psychosocial understanding of learning processes as reconfigurations of life experience. In doing so, they emphasise the need to develop methods of identifying all learning processes that contribute to promoting competence development based on subjective needs.

The article by **Franziska Laudenbach** comprises a comparative analysis of validation policies in Denmark, Germany, Poland and Turkey. The author focuses on the socio-economic context of each of the four countries and analyses their varying approaches to validating prior learning. On this account, the author outlines the context of the institutional setting of the skill formation system in each country as well as structuring mechanisms of the respective education systems. Overall, the author systematises the four countries' validation of prior learning systems in relation to the institutional settings and education systems as a shaping factor and underlines each country's governance of lifelong learning.

Eva Anslinger's paper examines factors of inclusion and exclusion on the labour market for target groups participating in a validation procedure. The results of the qualitative interviews conducted in the four countries during the EffectVPL project are

placed in an intersectional, multilevel model. This reveals inequality dimensions at the individual, structural and representative levels, and opens up the possibility of examining processes of inclusion and exclusion in the (regional) labour market before and after validation processes. The author finds that individuals without certificates from the formal education system experience particular difficulties in entering the labour market. However, if the competencies acquired over their lifetimes are visualised through VPL processes, new opportunities arise for them to participate in the education system and the labour market. The analysis identified further factors that can either promote or limit labour market access.

One of the most important project results of EffectVPL is counselling people interested in a validation process. **Bodil Lomholt Husted** discusses the instrument of guidance counselling as one of the key elements in the VPL process and uses examples to show how counselling could work.

Adult learning and VPL by **Özlem Ünlühisarcıklı** summarises the relevant theoretical approaches. Based on adult learning theories, such as andragogy, self-directed learning, experiential learning and transformative learning, the paper also explores the ways in which VPL can benefit from each of these theories or whether it has the potential to do so.

The final article in the first section focuses on career guidance. **Ewa Bodzińska-Guzik and Aleksandra Lis** show how the individual perspective is especially important regarding further educational opportunities and chances on the labour market. The article describes the project Kierunek Kariera (Direction Career), which relies on the skills audit method and is implemented by the Regional Labour Office in the Malopolska region in Poland. On the basis of biographical, in-depth interviews conducted with individuals who participated in the skills audit, the authors demonstrate the method to illustrate the impact of guidance on individual lives. Thus, the paper may appear as a source of inspiration for career guidance practitioners or as an information tool.

The second part sheds light on empirical dimensions of VPL. The individual level, and the role of employers and trade unions, are considered from different perspectives in the participating project countries.

Aleksandra Lis and **Joanna Łuszczki** consider the role of employers in VPL processes. Based on the interviews, the main benefits of employers are elaborated, but also the lessons learned for the future in the course of VPL processes. They are relevant self-assessment approaches for employers and the range of potential positive outcomes gained from solutions offered by validation, as well as a guide to VPL solutions in domestic and European law. This paper presents a set of issues in the area of human resources management and human resources development faced by employers in Denmark, Germany, Poland and Turkey.

The article by **Mario Patuzzi** offers deeper insight into the German VPL landscape. Patuzzi contextualises the validation of prior learning in the German VET system. Furthermore, he presents the different approaches in Germany to validating non-formal and informal learning, before outlining suggestions by German trade unions for simplifying this current, sometimes conflicting, variety of VPL approaches.

Since VPL is central to the EU's approach of lifelong learning, the article by **Aleksandra Lis, Franziska Laudenbach, Bodil Lomholt Husted and Özlem Ünlühisarcıklı** presents and conceptualises VPL as a tool for enhancing social inclusion and labour market mobility for individuals of all age groups. The paper links institutional VPL practice based on the national validation policy with the concrete benefits to the individuals who have started or completed a validation process. This comparative analysis of different regions and socio-cultural contexts in the four European countries shows the distinctions between national understandings and practices of VPL and their impact on individuals.

In a concluding summary, **Grażyna Prawelska-Skrzypek** acknowledges the central findings of the anthology and provides an outlook.

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Part one: Theoretical dimensions of VPL

Validation of prior learning as a lever for lifelong learning – life experience and competence development

HENNING SALLING OLESEN, BODIL LOMHOLT HUSTED, KIRSTEN AAGAARD

Abstract

This article places the validation of prior learning (VPL) as a tool for a general implementation of lifelong learning. It points out the contradiction between a normal biographical understanding of learning and the demands of accelerating societal development, while criticising the tendency towards conceptual instrumentalisation in this context, narrowing to the significance for the individual's working life. Instead, a broader concept is defined for the learner's development of competencies in all areas of life, based on life experience. A more theoretical psychosocial understanding of learning processes as reconfigurations of life experience is then reviewed. Finally, it highlights the need to develop methods of recognising all learning processes that help to promote competence development, based on subjective needs.

Keywords: Validation of prior learning, lifelong learning, life experience, life cycle, recognition regimes, learning processes.

Lifelong learning as a mobilisation of the learning reserves

Lifelong learning has once again become a central concept in the public debate. Where 30 to 40 years ago it was primarily a slogan for a democratisation of adults' access to education (UNESCO), today it is a far more comprehensive – but also more down-to-earth – programme: learning must be an integral part of all areas of community life and we must all learn throughout our lives. Lifelong learning has become a key concept in mobilising and adapting human resources for employment, economic growth and competition. At the same time, the prevailing justifications have changed: they are not primarily human wellbeing and development but competitiveness, both at the national and continental level (Europe versus North America versus the Far East). This may seem ironic, and worrying to some, but it is also logical: the fact that the economy and working life need human resources, and that subjective involvement is becoming a vocational qualification, makes lifelong learning a societal programme, driven by market economy and competitive society (Pedersen, 2011).

The transition from an industrial society to a knowledge and information society seems to have created a new awareness of the importance of human resources and

learning. The idea of lifelong learning implies a vision that every individual should not only have access to education and training throughout life, but also take advantage of all the informal learning opportunities in everyday life – in the workplace, with family and friends, during leisure time and cultural activities. The original idealistic and optimistic pursuit of lifelong learning as equal access to educational resources has slowly worn down over the course of three or four decades because it was not put into practice, but this endeavour seems to have gained a very different tailwind. Lifelong learning is now supported by both political and economic power elites throughout the capitalist world. At the same time, however, the concept has shifted its accent from ‘soft value’ to ‘hard currency’. The driving force in this interest is the desire to mobilise human resources and competencies to strengthen competitiveness – accompanied by a growing sense that these needs cannot be met through formal education and training initiatives alone. Most recently, the European Skills Agenda 2020, with a five-year plan, expresses the need for a skills adjustment for individuals and businesses. Global challenges such as the climate crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic and changes in work, learning and lifestyles together form the framework that is addressed with the new agenda for the acquisition of competencies.

At first glance, this means an increased political and economic commitment to education at all levels; this development also involves some challenges and counter-demands, however. The old humanities project of lifelong learning was part of educational optimism, the belief that the expansion of and open access to education was in itself the path to social justice, democratisation and enlightenment. Now the concept’s built-in institution-critical point becomes clearer: learning is not restricted to education. In fact, educational institutions have their limitations when it comes to covering requests for learning.

Although it is still the task of the family and the education system to ensure basic socialisation and competence development in childhood, the individual must increasingly learn throughout life – both new professional qualifications and general competencies that may promote the will and ability to cooperate with and learn from others. It may be more difficult to develop new and relevant ways of thinking about learning and pedagogy. ‘Lifelong learning’ and ‘competence development’, which are prevalent in the public debate, are still fairly fluid slogans and the horizon for relevant issues is being expanded considerably.

This development calls for new ways of looking at education policy. Perceiving learning only in institutional education becomes too narrow. We must instead (once again) extend the horizon of policy to include the learning processes that take place in contexts other than formal education and in phases other than childhood and adolescence. We therefore need to broaden both the perspective to include the wider social and cultural context, and we must theoretically revise the understanding of learning processes. The concept of learning must include both intended education and training as well as the learning that takes place or could take place in activities with another primary purpose. Moreover, education and training are described in (expected) learning outcomes and results in relation to business use.