

How can effectiveness of VPL foster individuals' benefit?

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The use of Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) is assumed to enhance individual's benefits for the access to labour market and job mobility respectively to lifelong learning and education, e.g. VET, HE and CVET. In general, benefits for the individual are recognized in a broad sense, covering also personal development and growth. National and EU policies on VPL highlight the impacts for both employability and lifelong learning¹ while also stating the necessity of the Europe 2020 strategy for "smart, sustainable and inclusive growth by enhancing the use of more flexible learning pathways.

In the 2016 Erasmus+ Project *EffectVPL*², it is a main perspective to investigate the effectiveness of VPL policies and practices for labour market inclusion and access to educational pathways.

The initial project objective is to carry out a research study among former users of VPL in order to examine their experienced benefits of VPL as these are expressed by the users and afterwards assessed as deriving from effectiveness of the concrete VPL process. Based on this research, the project will identify shortfalls as well as good practices of VPL and its impact on individuals' labour market mobility.

This article focuses on the necessity of acknowledging the complexity of VPL when considering effectiveness of VPL and individual's benefits to be strongly connected. While addressing the Biennale 2017 objective, "VPL strengthens lifelong learning for all – The user at the centre", the article will focus specifically on the learning aspects of the VPL process given that lifelong learning should be conceived in many respects and likewise realised in terms of a multitude of learning steps. In addition, the article's focus on benefits for the individual is mainly looked at from the perspective of the target group of disadvantaged people.

1 Council Recommendations, 2012; Official Journal of the European Union, C 398/1.

2 <http://www.uni-bremen.de/en/zap/research/effectvpl-effectiveness-of-validation-of-prior-non-formal-and-informal-learning.html>

1. Question 1: what determines the effectiveness of VPL?

To answer the overall question raised above, how can effectiveness of VPL foster individual's benefits? two more questions need to be examined; firstly, what determines the effectiveness of VPL? i.e. which elements, aspects, demands and requirements must be fulfilled by the VPL arrangement in order to assume a causality of effectiveness and benefits for the individual?

Major European documents, i.e. European Guidelines on validation on non-formal and informal learning 2015, The Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014 together with the Cedefop paper, 2014, Stepping up the pace ³ highlighted which requirements concerning structure, approach, methods and tools used in the VPL process should be provided in order to support the individual's benefit of her or his VPL results.

When talking about enhancing individual's benefits for career and lifelong learning, it is a specific focus of interest to examine the learning elements in the VPL process while anticipating that a learning approach by the VPL professionals provides a powerful platform for the individual's later benefits – especially for the differentiated target group of disadvantaged people – and for whom the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is of crucial importance.

In the following, such learning aspects are examined for the VPL arrangement in terms of a number of interrelated implications.

Implications of transparency in structure and procedures for the individual's VPL

The aspects of availability of - and the access to the VPL arrangement deals with the concrete visibility of the VPL arrangement; i.e. VPL exists as an offer to individuals to have their prior learning assessed, validated and possibly recognised. Information about VPL as an offer for citizens should be at hand as specifically targeted information, also for the broad and differentiated group of disadvantaged people who might not have - for various reasons - benefitted equally from lifelong learning.

Transparency throughout the VPL arrangement is a key-requirement for the establishing of a comfortable and safe environment for the individual. Availability and access have to do with transparency of the VPL arrangement's structure and procedures Here, transparency counts for the information on what is going to happen in the VPL process? Why and How? What does it mean to have my prior learning examined and validated? Am I going to fail? Is this a kind of examination? Sentiments and questions of this kind are typical for individuals that may not have been first-movers in school and career.

For people, having throughout lifetime been confronted with knowledge and skills gaps and lackings, an offer for validation of prior learning obviously requires both

³ Stepping up the pace (2014), Reflections on the future of EU tools. Cedefop, European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training.

adequate information and appreciative communication - to be actually accepted by the user as an offer for a second change and a possibility for lifelong learning via new learning pathways.

Awareness raising for the potential benefits of VPL calls for the provision of motivation and guidance resources in the entire VPL arrangements and, in addition, relevant and understandable information is crucial for the individual VPL user to enable her to decide whether to take part in validation or not.

Therefore, in order to make the VPL process transparent and consistent for the individual, information on who, what, why, where and when concerning VPL should be clearly communicated.⁴

Implications of approach for the individual's VPL

To accept the VPL as the new chance for stepping up in career and lifelong learning strongly relates to the individual's possibilities for influence in his own VPL process. Does the individual take part in the VPL on his own choice? Or does this happen as a necessity being more or less forced, by, for instance, the employer or social authorities? Is the purpose of the VPL defined by other stakeholders than the individual? Or, does the individual have the right and possibility to define her own purpose of her VPL, e.g. for an access to or customizing of education or for enhancing own opportunities in the labour market? And, does the VPL process provide frames and guidance resources to allow for a change in the individual's own purpose for the VPL process if this should occur during the VPL process?

Defining VPL as a learning process in itself requires the involvement and co-responsibility of the individual – precisely as it does in all learning processes. Levels of involvement in the learning process clearly imply high learning potentials for the learner.⁵

Likewise, when the VPL candidate encounters an openminded, useroriented and recognising approach by the VPL professionals, an important foundation of motivation for lifelong learning could be built here. Hence, the individual's initial meeting with the entire VPL arrangement is of crucial importance for the VPL results. This initial meeting is recommended by the EU VPL policy as the identification phase. Therefore the VPL professionals should be able to:

- Support the individual define his / her validation purpose and to help any redefinition of purpose if this changes during the identification process
- Advice and guide the individual in choosing the appropriate form and method for the identification process.⁶

4 ValiGuide, <http://nvl.org/valiguide/>

5 Illeris, Knud (2015), Læring

6 ValiGuide, <http://nvl.org/valiguide/>

Implications of methods and tools for individual's VPL

Evaluation of the VPL usage in the Nordic countries demonstrates that the users who benefit the most from a VPL are people without formal qualifications from upper secondary education or VET, and immigrants. What is interesting here – when looking for the effectiveness of VPL – is the interrelationship of the VPL approach and the choice of methods that are used especially in the mapping and documentation phase. As illustrated above, VPL is also a learning process and especially for the users with less acquaintance with the formal education sector. This is strongly focused in the mapping and documentation of individual's competences that takes place by common effort of the individual's and the VPL practitioner to make visible all competences acquired in the various learning contexts. This part of the VPL process implies the individual's learning potential of becoming increasingly aware of his or her existing competences.

In the process that leads to this awareness, the VPL practitioner must be aware of not narrowing the width of the individual's total competences too early. Among various means and methods for the mapping and documentation purpose, the retrospective and exploratory conversation, with the divergent perspective, is essential as this actually supports the individual in examining the wide range of her entire experience, knowledge, skills and competences with a scope that is not, at this stage, narrowed and focused according to a more specific aim of assessment. When the user is ready for this, another type and approach of conversation is useful for this purpose, focusing now on the perspectives of user's documented experiences. This conversation, with the convergent perspective, contributes to the systematization of prior learning and the relating of this into a clearer defined future job- or education perspective.⁷

Due to this article's examination of how effectiveness in the VPL leads to individuals' benefits, it is important to underline the fact that the mapping and documentation phase might lead to the assessment and certification phases, but it is also possible, that an individual's validation purpose only includes identification and documentation in order to acknowledge learning experiences. This perspective is of specific interest for the aim of this article.

Implications of cross-sectoral and cross-institutional cooperation for the individual's VPL

Many research studies of VPL practice have stressed the problem of fragility concerning the VPL strategy and structure when these seem to jeopardize the importance of cohesion and inclusion for the individual in her VPL. Fragmentation of the VPL risks occurring when VPL results are not recognised or trusted by end users – being either formal educational institutions or employers. The problem of such lack of trust might have to do with the absence of common agreement of

⁷ In the Interreg project, Yggdrasil, principles for the documentation of individual's competences are under development with the working title: Life CV. www.yggdrasil-oks.eu

assessment and recognition standards and criteria, and in some cases it could also be about coinciding interests.

Among more studies, the Erasmus +, 2014 project, AVA (Actionplan for Validation and non-formal Adult education) have dealt specifically with this problem.⁸

The key to trust of validation results lies in the cohesion of VPL in terms of cooperation and coordination among cross-sectoral and cross-institutional contexts and depending on the mutual acknowledgement of validity and reliability of the individual's validation results. Obviously, the negation of such mutual acceptance and recognition of the individual's VPL represents a major barrier for the individual when talking about the relationship of effectiveness and individual's benefits.

Hence, to benefit from the VPL in terms of individual's ability to move one step up in career or further education, the coordination of phases in the VPL process are crucial. Cross-sectoral and cross-institutional cooperation together with transparency of all VPL elements for the individual contributes significantly to make the VPL arrangement consistent and permeable and to prevent fragmentation.

For enhancing the effectiveness of VPL and the benefits for the individual, the following suggestions are provided by ValiGuide, on the coordination issue:

- The Increase of educational and employment stakeholders' knowledge on potentials and rules of the national validation system helps overcoming mutual resistance on accepting the results of individuals' validation process.
- Dialogues between validation stakeholders in order to develop a common language and understanding of validation helps the recognition of the various types of benefits that validation can bring to individuals.
- Implementation of quality control methods and follow up on validation processes builds mutual trust between different institutions and sectors and leads to further development of validation arrangements.
- Increasing the transfer of existing tools and methods proven valuable in some contexts to different contexts contributes to the acceptance of individual's validation results.

2. [Question 2] How can individual's benefits be defined and conceived?

A new VET reform has been implemented in Denmark since 2015. A special VET pathway for adults (25+) is part of the reform and it includes a VPL as a compulsory element for the trainee to carry out before starting his VET. Based on the results of the VPL, the trainee's individual education plan is developed and – according to defined standards for prior learning and experience, relevant for the education in

⁸ <http://www.eaea.org/en/projects/eaea-coordinated-projects/ava.html>

question, the length of the education is calculated; i.e. merit for trainee's assessed competences.

The political rationale for this adult vocational education pathway is partly to increase adults' motivation for VET having one's prior learning validated and – to various degrees – approved, partly to contribute to the solution of the national problem of an urgent lack of skilled workforce.

Apart from the potential of having the entire education shortened – which undoubtedly is motivating for many adults, the adult pathway also implies that the pedagogic and didactic practice of the education is planned with the use of learning methods, which enables the trainee to further build upon her practice experience, knowledge and competences. For the VET schools and the teachers and trainers to manage this high degree of differentiation in classroom and workshop, flexible learning environments are under development throughout the Danish VET schools.

A national midterm evaluation⁹ of preliminary results provides evidence of rather differentiated character. Firstly, the potential for having your VET shortened does not always reflect the adult trainees' interest and motivation. Some adults express an uncertainty as to actually acquiring – in the end – the entire competences due to final competence requirements and learning objectives of the VET. A fear of exams, maybe due to former negative school experience, demonstrate that the VPL process also has an important mission in the awareness raising and the building of individual's self-esteem. On the other hand, an increase of self-esteem together with the acknowledgment of learning needs for moving one-step-up is the typical outcome from the VPL as part of the VET reform, as teachers and trainers communicate about these experiences.

For the VET schools, the compulsory VPL is a new requirement and a more comprehensive VPL practice is under development in the years to come. Right now, it is obvious that VPL approach, professional competences and guidance resources should be prioritized in order to strengthen the outcome of the learning dimensions of VPL bearing the potential for enhancing the individual's learning competences.

Now, turning back to the initial question of how to define and conceive individuals' benefit from VPL, attention must be paid to the EU and national assumptions of individuals' benefits from VPL in terms of access to labour market inclusion and further education. However, there should be no doubt that this is the great expectations of individuals, 'belonging' to the broad group of disadvantaged people. Nevertheless, it is equally necessary to admit individuals the patience for realisation of such a step.

For many individuals, the road to harvest such benefits of VPL is preceded by a number of smaller intermediary steps before a major one. The title of the Biennale 2017 is: "Validation of prior learning strengthens lifelong learning for all".

9 Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut, 2016.

Benefits – as VPL results - can be defined more or less narrow as respectively access to labour market & mobility and/ or to education and training. Therefore, VPL should not just be regarded the alternative access to labour market inclusion and education – as the summative result of a VPL. The VPL process, in itself, bears the potential to add, significantly, to the individual's motivation for lifelong learning when the process successfully contributes to increase self-esteem, self-reflection of one's own learning abilities together with gaining the personal courage to enter lifelong learning.

Finally, for the actuality of the focus of this article – How can effectiveness of VPL foster individuals' benefit, the Erasmus+ project, EffectVPL is right now preparing for the research of how effectiveness of VPL and individuals' benefits for labour market inclusion and lifelong learning are - or could be - linked.

In the research to be carried out, there should be a specific focus on the preconditions of effectiveness in order to expect benefits, while looking at the entire VPL arrangement. Such preconditions are the dimensions of policy, structure, purpose, methods & tools to mention some basic principles in the VPL and not to forget others like the approach to the individual and her VPL together with resources of guidance and the professional competences to support the VPL process with the individual at the centre.

Thus, the answer to the above question should take a starting point in the preliminary acknowledgement of the complexity of the VPL process and practice and in the understanding that both complexity and diversity of the individual VPL processes must be acknowledged when the above focus is examined to identify the individual's – unique – benefits.

This article has focused on learning dimensions of the individual's VPL process.

3. Concluding remarks

To support the learning dimensions of the individual's VPL – and hence, to increase individual's benefits the following general principles should characterize VPL approaches:

- The applicant must be met with openness and respect.
- Information and counselling about the process must be given.
- The applicant must be given the best opportunity to go over a clarification and an assessment with an outcome that they deem to be meaningful and fair, according to the expectations and motives of the applicant.
- Support and counselling should be provided throughout the process, and the people carrying out the assessment should make as much effort as the applicant to understand what the applicant is seeking.
- The applicant should have access to help to ensure they understand the information on the process and they should be given the opportunity to create an overview of time, methods and requirements.

- Educational institutions should plan clarification and assessment processes by introducing clear and transparent procedures.
- You must have an individual approach in order to meet the individual applicant.
- The applicant should receive continuous counselling based on their needs.¹⁰

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¹⁰ National Knowledge Centre for Validation of prior Learning: Anerkendelse af realkompetencer – Sådan gør vi /Validation of prior learning – how we do it. 2012.