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**The Validation of competences - A crucial issue to enhance access to Higher Education**  
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### Abstract

The Validation of competences has become a main issue in Europe since the Lisbon process launched in 2000. Setting several examples of LLL projects, the article intends to show that VPL has been implemented throughout Europe in many ways. Firstly by identifying and assessing non formal and informal learning such as a voluntary experience. Secondly by associating underrepresented target groups such as migrants. The article is finally proposing a new deal for the validation of competences in Europe.

**Key words** : informal learning, non-formal learning, volunteering, migrants, validation, competences.

### Introduction

Many European countries are faced to huge rates of unemployment especially among youngsters. On the one hand, graduates are now faced to unexpected difficulties on the labour market. On the other hand, people without any qualification or diploma are willing to have access to Higher Education to enhance their professional opportunities.

The Bologna process initiated on a European level is meant to propose a European Qualification Framework (EQF) with the aim to link countries' qualifications systems together acting as a translation device to make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and systems in Europe but also for employers. Each European country has made an effort to express the content of the diplomas/certificates with regards to the skills and competences acquired and their link with the labour market (types of employment to be proposed).

At the same time, the Copenhagen process launched the European strategy for enhanced cooperation in Vocational Education and Training (VET). Initial and continuing VET share the dual objective of contributing to employability and economic growth and responding to broader societal challenges, in particular promoting social cohesion.. The overall aim is to improve the quality of vocational training and to encourage more individuals to make wider use of vocational learning opportunities, whether at school, in higher education, in the workplace, or through private courses.

The EU's overarching programme is focused both on growth and jobs. Knowledge and the innovation it sparks, are the EU's most valuable assets, particularly in difficult economic times. We intend to show that the validation of competences has been implemented in many ways in Europe for the past 10 years and has contributed to enhance employability.

As underlined in the ALLinHE project, Europe needs dynamic Higher Education (HE) to stay competitive but lacks "an open door policy". We will first and foremost explain the challenging issues offered by the VPL and the AllinHE, an Erasmus project which focuses on a multi-targeted VPL model (integrating both formative and summative approach) and offers a comparative analysis of the VPL methods and approaches to under-represented (target) groups in HE.

On the one hand, taking into account informal and non formal learning, such as a voluntary experience, may be a first way to facilitate access to HE. Graduates should be able to enrich their diploma with other experiences (professional, social, personal) gained in complement to their academic cursus. We will present some methods

and tools already offered to facilitate a professional integration and career success on the basis of a voluntary experience with Leonardo da Vinci projects implemented since 2003.

On the other hand, access to Higher Education should be facilitated among public with special profiles in making VPL strategies be clearer and more accessible. We will focus our analysis on migrants on the basis of several European projects aiming at empowering migrants and enhancing their opportunities on the national labour markets, taking into account their migratory backgrounds and the special competences attached to it.

Thanks to this comparative approach, we would like to propose a “new deal” for the Validation of competences by emphasizing the circular approach of the lifelong learning programme.

## I. The key issue of the Validation of competences in Europe

Validation of competences has been a main issue in Europe since the Lisbon process of March 2000, where the European Union Heads of States and Governments agreed to make the EU “*the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy by 2010*”. We would like to emphasize two LLL projects aiming at combining VPL with the European diversity : VPL2 (Leonardo da Vinci, 2007-2009) and the AllinHE (Erasmus, 2011-2014)

### 1. The main issue of VPL <sup>1</sup>

As underlined in the Leonardo da Vinci project, “Managing European diversity in lifelong learning - VPL 2”, the underlying principle of lifelong learning is that “initial education is no longer enough for a lifetime social-economic career”. It is also important to develop our competences (skills, knowledge, attitude & ambitions) throughout life by realizing that “our glass is already half full” and by understanding that everyone learns in every possible learning environment (formal, non formal or informal).

The following definition was given: “Valuation of Prior Learning (VPL) means :

- a) Valuation shows the real human potential of personal competencies;
- b) VPL is the process of (a) assessing and validating personal competencies within the socio-economic context and (b) offering a personal development strategy ;
- c) VPL focuses on the individual perspective and makes the (public and private) system customer-driven for the sake of personal development ;
- d) VPL shows the way how organization have or should articulate the need for competences in their Human Resources Management, facilitate the learning process of their employees and connect their demand-articulations to the competencies standards of the learning system;
- e) Organizations benefit from VPL through individuals’ development.”

The top-down and bottom-up met each other halfway, empowering individuals and organisations to serve their summative and formative purposes by defining and creating “zones of mutual trust” for the use of validation-principles on a sectorial level in the variety of European learning cultures.

### 2. The “open door policy” offered by the ALLinHE project<sup>2</sup>

Europe needs dynamic Higher Education (HE) to stay competitive but HE lacks an “open door policy”. Top down facilities are in place (legislation, EQF, etc) but practical methodology for opening up HE (bottom-up practices) often fails. VPL opens and supports learning chances for citizens but is mostly under developed and under-utilised. Testing innovated VPL should facilitate access to HE for social inclusion of target-groups and bridge the gap between the top-down and the bottom-up practices in HE.

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<sup>1</sup> Rudd Duvekot, “Managing European Diversity in lifelong learning- the many perspectives of the Valuation of Prior Learning in the European workplace”, Nijmegen, Vught, Amsterdam, HAN University, Foundation EC-VPL & Hogeschool van Amsterdam, September 2007.

<sup>2</sup> led by Inholland University in Finland, Denmark, France, Romania, Slovenia , UK & South Korea, Erasmus (2011-2014),

The AllinHE project links the methods of Validation of Prior Learning to a practical strategy for the social inclusion of special target groups underrepresented and non-traditional learners : migrants & ethnic minorities, persons aged over 50 years and disabled people. The main assumption of the project is that transforming existing VPL-methodology into a multi-targeted approach not only innovates the methodology of VPL but also orients HE into learning opportunities for all.

The project implements:

1. a multi-targeted VPL model providing a diagnostic or personalized, formative and summative approaches ;
2. a comparative analysis of the VPL methods and approaches for the three main identified target groups;
3. a training programme for HE professionals to learn how to work with the VPL model;
4. a pilot of the multi-targeted VPL model with target groups and synthesis of test results, focusing on managing Europe's diversity ;
5. a transversal analysis of new strategies and methods resulting in a handbook highlighting best practices for HE professionals with the multi-targeted VPL model;
6. an ALLinHE network gathering research, tests and evaluations of inclusive VPL practices;
7. a proposal of a European academic bank credit system.

In order to better understand the innovative way offered by the ALLinHE, we would like to focus (a) on a special example of experience to be taken into account in the VPL process, a voluntary experience (part II); and (b) explain the strategy that might be meaningful for a special target group, migrants (part III).

## II. Valuing a voluntary experience in the context of Higher Education

Volunteering is as an example of informal and non-formal learning. Two European projects have meant to propose a validation of the competences on the basis of this learning experience.

### 1. Volunteering as a part of education and lifelong learning <sup>3</sup>

A very important issue in the lifelong learning process is the acquisition of competences. In a recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council, of December 2006, on key competences for lifelong learning, it is stated that "*{...} key competences in the shape of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to each context are fundamental for each individual in a knowledge-based society. They provide added value for the labour market, social cohesion and active citizenship by offering flexibility and adaptability, satisfaction and motivation {...}*".

Because they should be acquired by everyone, the recommendation proposes a reference tool for the Member States to ensure that these key competences are fully integrated into their strategies and infrastructures, particularly in the context of lifelong learning. The acquisition of key competences "*{...} fits in with the principles of equality and access for all. This reference framework also applies in particular to disadvantaged groups whose educational potential requires support. Examples of such groups include people with low basic skills, early school leavers, the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities or migrants, etc. {...}*" .

Volunteering is an important element of lifelong learning. Voluntary experience is part of non-formal and informal learning. It enables learning processes as well as knowledge transfer. Learning processes may be informal but they are also linked with organisational structures and functions. On the occasion of the European Year of Volunteering (EYV 2011), the European Union emphasized volunteering as "an active expression of civic participation" and a means to strengthen common European values such as solidarity and social cohesion.

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<sup>3</sup> Halba (B) « Volunteering in the VPL perspective » in *Managing European Diversity in Lifelong Learning*, op.cit.

Volunteering also provides important learning opportunities because involvement in voluntary activities can provide people with new skills and competences and can even improve their employability. At the end of the European Year of Volunteering, the European Commission made some recommendations to Member states. In particular, at a European level, it is preparing a proposal for a Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning including the recognition of competences through volunteering.

This was the aim of a pioneer Leonardo da Vinci project, Vaeb (2003-2006) awarded in Helsinki in 2006 for excellent practice in addressing the priorities of the Copenhagen process and promoting an enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training.

## 2. The Vaeb- a Leonardo da Vinci project designed to assess a voluntary experience<sup>4</sup>

The hypothesis of this project was that associations may be the ideal place to get accustomed to and trained with novel and innovative solutions and practices, as well as to experiment or acquire new skills. For volunteers, a voluntary experience may lead to or facilitate a professional career. Identifying and evaluating the skills and qualifications acquired through volunteering in the associations should be the way to recognize and validate this informal learning.

It should be very useful for people, who have no professional experience, to engage with a first activity (youngsters) and for people, who have been outside the labour market, to renew a professional activity (parents who have raised their children, sick people when they have recovered, prisoners when they are free...). A voluntary experience is an alternative way to experiment, develop or renew with specific skills and qualifications in a specific context, neither public nor private, with both professional and non-professional staff, with the goal of including and serving the general interest.

The main aim of the Vaeb project was to assess voluntary experiences by identifying, evaluating and validating skills and qualifications acquired through volunteering as a process of informal learning for a professional purpose. The first step consisted in proposing an overview of the recognition of voluntary work in each of the 7 countries and the kind of training proposed by professionals to volunteers and the qualifications they required. It then identified the main skills and qualifications developed in the voluntary activities and the ways and tools to identify them for professionals.

The proposed tool and method, a portfolio and guide, were designed to identify and evaluate the skills and qualifications required and acquired in volunteering and to validate these skills and qualifications in a professional perspective. These skills and qualifications could be validated in the short term for the associations, in the long term for their partners (public and private sectors...). The main publics focused on were, first and foremost, volunteers willing to renew their involvement in the labour market: youngsters, parents after having raised the children, long term unemployed people. As indirect publics, public authorities working with associations and human resources are also considered as major users of the tool and method provided by the portfolio.

At the end of the Vaeb process, an action plan was proposed to volunteers that offered opportunities to go into a VPL process as the portfolio they had already filled was exactly the same work required in Higher Education for a validation of competences (to ask for a diploma or qualification).

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<sup>4</sup> led by iriv in France, Austria, Germany, Italy, Hungary, Poland and the United Kingdom, Leonardo da Vinci (2003 -2006)

### 3. From Higher Education to the Labour market – the VAB project 5

Inspired by the Vaeb project, the VAB<sup>6</sup> project is dedicated to University Teachers & Trainers (UT&T). It proposes a tool and a method to improve the global evaluation of the students by taking into account the experience they have acquired beyond university to enhance their chances for professional occupations.

The VAB project identifies, values and even validates knowledge, skills and competences developed/gained through informal or non-formal learning by students outside the universities. The VAB project should thus improve the transition between the University and the labour market thanks to :

- a. a pedagogical tool (a portfolio) for teachers/trainers to identify knowledge, skills and competences acquired/developed beyond the university by their students through non formal and informal learning. UT&T could also validate and integrate the competences assessed in the global evaluation of their students, for instance through the delivery of ECTS;
- b. a digital development of the portfolio (an e- portfolio) from which the UT&T could also have an access to other functionalities, in particular, professional integration of students, professional opportunities for youth on the labour market;
- c. a distance training (an e-training) for UT&T including a virtual tutor and a self-training in order to clarify and organize the different steps to be followed by users to implement the e- portfolio thanks to a collaborative platform.

Compared with the previous project, the innovation of this European project comes from officially recognising the knowledge and skills acquired by students in their volunteering, thanks to the assessment of UT&T. This is also quite difficult to use a portfolio alone. The support of UT&T is most welcome by students. The tricky part of the project is to train UT&T for such an assessment, since they are not all familiar with this approach.

A contribution of the ALLinHE project might be to emphasize the two way process of the recognition of competence. University is not the only place where knowledge, skills and competences may be acquired. The official recognition of non formal and informal learning is a step forward to bridge the gap between University and Community. A close collaboration between them is a key issue for preparing the future of students (VAB perspective) or future students (ALLinHE perspective).

#### III. Taking into account special profiles and background - migrants

Another step in the ALLinHE process is to integrate underrepresented target groups such as migrants. Previous European projects: Mem-Vol & Involve projects focused on integration and Migrapass focused on lifelong learning may bring meaningful illustration of the method to be enhanced to facilitate access to HE for migrants.

##### 1. Empowering migrants as a first step to enhance VPL - the MEM-VOL and Involve projects

Migrants and ethnic minorities suffer in all member states of the European Union from high unemployment. The effects of migrant and ethnic minorities volunteering as a means of integration - societal, cultural and on the labour market - and as a means of empowerment and development of the civil society is highly underestimated and disregarded.

The Mem-Vol project (2003)<sup>7</sup> aimed at promoting and facilitating volunteering and self-help of migrants and ethnic minorities as an objective to combat social exclusion and poverty. Little is known about volunteering of migrants and ethnic minorities, although kinship and neighbourhood networks and ethnic communities are in the focus of research. Volunteering - in favour of the own community or for different groups - might be a means of integration

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<sup>5</sup> B. Halba (2012), “Breaking the waves – the lifelong learning perspective to enhance a professional integration”, University of Northampton (UK)

<sup>6</sup> led and coordinated by the University of Evry Val d’Essonne (Ueve) & iriv in France, Austria, Greece , Ireland and Slovenia.

<sup>7</sup> led by INBAS-Sozialforschung in Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, Community Action Programme to Combat Social Exclusion (2003)

into society in a double sense: e.g. by labour market counseling to facilitate employment or by educational training for children of foreign origin and by developing new skills and qualifications through volunteering. Thanks to the Mem-Vol project, a state of the art was made on the work done both on migration and volunteering, underlining that very little work has so far drawn on either of these approaches.

Inspired by the Mem-Vol project, the Involve project (2005-2006)<sup>8</sup> went one step further in making concrete proposals to public stakeholders at local, regional, national and even European levels in increasing awareness of all stakeholders concerning the value of volunteering for integration. Migrants' involvement in voluntary and civic activities as a means for better integration was the main issue of this two year project. It sought to address the lack of knowledge about migrant volunteering including third country nationals' concepts of, and attitude towards, volunteering and national policies & actions that facilitate these activities. It has nurtured a trans-European network whose main goal has been to enhance dialogue between stakeholders; identification, exchange and dissemination of knowledge and best practice and develop recommendations for policy changes.

## **2. the Migrapass project – combining integration and lifelong learning**

Empowering migrants is a first step to enhance VPL. Another European project, the Migrapass<sup>9</sup>, has been one step further in improving the recognition of migrant workers' skills and competences.

### **2.1 Changing the perspectives to validate migrants' competences**

The Migrapass project was proposed taking into consideration three main barriers or obstacles migrants had to cope with on the national labour markets. A first issue to be considered is how skills and competences of migrants acquired in their native countries might be recognised on the national labour market of the host societies. The average profile of the migrant is a low qualified one. Nevertheless, some of the migrants have had a diploma in their country that wouldn't be recognised in the host society. Some opportunities might be offered to them in the field of non formal and informal learning, the Copenhagen process. Even though their national diploma or qualification is not valid, the experience and competences attached to them should make them be qualified for some employments.

Another issue is to struggle against any discrimination faced on the labour market by migrants. One of the main obstacles is the lack of knowledge of the "hidden" labour market, based on personal or social network. In this context, the mentoring proposed by the Migrapass, might play a key role in opening doors, in introducing them to potential employers, in identifying professional opportunities. The main purpose is to propose them a professional accompaniment – a companion- provided by people (professionals or volunteers considered as mentors) that should take into account their special experience.

A last issue tackled by the Migrapass is to promote diversity on the labour market. Migrants have developed, thanks to their migration experience, unique skills and competences. They shouldn't be considered as handicaps or barriers but should be recognised as specific ones. The Human Resource approach calls them "meta-competence" which means competence linked directly to the mobility. The positive image of their migration background should be decisive in their professional career.

The Migrapass project is also meant to change the image of migrants and so make a difference in their professional integration by proposing an appropriate tool and method to value the unique experience of migrants and also identify the needs expressed by migrants to make their skills and competences be recognized and adapted to the national labour market..

### **2.2 A portfolio and a companion**

Based on the Vaeb project<sup>10</sup>, the Migrapass has implemented a tool and methodology - a portfolio together with a companion - to support migrants to express their experience, identify their skills and competences, and to

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<sup>8</sup> led by the European Centre for Volunteering (CEV) in Belgium, Germany, Austria, Spain, France, Hungary, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, European Commission , INTI Programme (2005-2006)

<sup>9</sup> Led and coordinated by Autremonde & iriv in Austria, Bulgaria, France, UK and Spain , Leonardo da Vinci (2010-2012)

define the possible areas of employment, in the light of knowledge and skills developed through their individual experience: professional (including training,), social (volunteer work), personal, etc.

This tool and method – a portfolio & companion – is meant to make migrants be capable of synthesizing and valuing their experience (personal, social, professional...) in order to value them on the labour market. Thanks to the portfolio, migrants can write their own profile, through a self-analysis of the knowledge and skills, useful to give them value and put into a single tool and method (the e-portfolio) the various experiences of the migrants, including informal and non-formal experiences.

The portfolio process follows a three step process. The first step identifies relevant experiences acquired by migrants (professional and social experience together with the migration experience). The second step proposes a detailed description of the migrant's experience replacing it in its context (environment, available resources, and constraints for its achievement...). A third step is dedicated to the migrants' competences which emerge from the description of the experience. The more the experience has been described, the better the competence can be identified and made transferable.

The migrant's route may be considered as a holistic experience. Thanks to the Migrapass portfolio, migrants are asked to identify and describe their professional experience both in their country of origin and the host country. The social experience has to be explained: it includes any kind of active citizenship activities (being a volunteer in an association, being elected member of a local authority, being a member of the council of a village...). A migration experience gathers both internal and external migrations. The last type of experience is the personal and family experience (and the responsibilities within the family).

The core of the portfolio process is to express the experience in terms of competence. Twelve main competences have been proposed for migrants: competence linked to the ability of making things, to managing and organising oneself, to developing a migration project, to working in a team, to communicating, to developing networks, to collecting and efficiently using information, to overcoming a difficult situation, to living and working in a different cultural environment, to transferring one's professional experience, to joining a new community, to defending rights.

Thanks to a collaborative methodology, migrants are asked to identify the competences relevant for their employment research and to evaluate the level of achievement corresponding to each of the competence: assisted competence (level 1), collaborative competence (level 2), autonomous competence (level 3), expert competence (level 4), and creative competence (level 5).

The Migrapass portfolio offers a dynamic and open process based on a collaborative methodology. The tool & method offered by the Migrapass will be used among migrants in the framework of the ALLinHE. In its last part, the action plan, migrants are proposed to enter in a VPL process as a diploma or a qualification is often required on the European labour markets to be able to work as professionals. Volunteering may be a first step to acquire some "professional experience" in the host country.

### 2.3 The Migrapass approach and its combination with the ALLinHE

Validating informal and non formal learning is of increasing importance across Europe as validation is seen as an important element of national policies on education, training and employment<sup>11</sup>. The Cedefop experts have analyzed the methods and instruments used to identify, assess and attribute recognition to learning that takes place outside formal education and training institution. The outcomes of these learning processes are diverse and multidimensional.

The experts have noted an extensive use of portfolio approaches. They have also insisted on the fact that the selection process included in portfolio building "promotes self-assessment and focuses learners' attention on

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<sup>10</sup> Vaeb project- op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> Cedefop, *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*, Thessaloniki, December 2009

quality criteria". A good portfolio for validation, according to the assessors, is characterized by being easy to assess because it is focused on specific matched learning outcomes. The most important risks underlined in the process are when applicants prepare the portfolio alone or with little mediation from one tutor. This is the reason why the Migrapass is proposing a mentoring process. The profile of the mentor is widely understood: they can be trainers or professionals working in the professional orientation but they should also be migrants themselves having already experienced the Migrapass portfolio.

Learning by doing and by transmitting one's own experience to other migrants is the basic philosophy of the Migrapass. This is part of the empowerment spirit: making migrants be the main actors of their integration. The competence approach is a key issue in a successful professional integration in the long term. Because of the lack of national experience or because of the linguistic issue, migrants could be, in the short term oriented on very basic tasks and low qualified employments. In the mid-term or long-term, the Migrapass approach should allow them to improve their professional career and to make a positive choice: either to stay in their present position or to change it in valuing other competences.

The Europass which is commonly used in Europe proposing a European Curriculum together with other documents to assess a level of language, providing diploma or professional qualifications, could be enriched by a specific tool and method, focused on "users with special needs" : migrants. The Migrapass and the AllinHE share the same spirit:

- opening doors and changing perspectives especially among underrepresented target groups in the lifelong learning perspective (the example of migrants);
- integrating different tools & approaches to manage diversity (on a European and non-European levels);
- implementing a holistic approach combining personal, social and professional experiences;
- facilitating the access to VPL in enhancing a mentoring approach : trainers/mentors are offered a special strategy (assessor training manual for the ALLinHE);
- combining the top-down and the bottom-up approaches : both are important to better understand the opportunities offered by VPL (micro-level, meso-level and macro-level);
- considering the validation of competences as a two way process.

### **Conclusion – a "New deal" for the Validation of competences**

Validation of competences has been a crucial issue in Europe for the past twelve years. Even though the EU has not yet become "*the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy by 2010*" as promised at the Lisbon Council in 2010, many positive elements may be underlined.

Volunteering has been officially recognized as a non formal and informal learning and as an eligible experience to enrich a VPL process both (a) on national levels for instance in France since the Social modernisation act of 2002 and (b) on a European level with the recommendation prepared by the European Commission at the end of the European Year of Volunteering (EYV 2011) on the validation of non formal and informal learning including the recognition of competences through volunteering.

Underrepresented target groups and untraditional learners have been taken into account on a European level. Through the Mem-Vol (2003) and Involve (2005-2006) projects, perspectives have been changed considering migrants as "active actors of integration" and no more as just "publics". This empowering process has led to the Migrapass project (2010-2012) proposing a portfolio and companion to identify and assess migrants' competences that could be in the future integrated in the Europass device.

The "open door" strategy is to be understood in many ways. Combining the top-down approach (EU and States providing legislation and financing for VPL) and the bottom-up approach (individuals and organisations willing to be better supported for the access to Higher Education and proposing tools & methods to do so) may be one way. The several European projects we have presented illustrate this bottom-up strategy and especially the ALLinHE.

Another way would be to consider that lifelong learning, as integration, is a two way process. Bridging the gap between University and the Community should be a challenging issue for the years to come. Even though University remains the place to deliver diplomas and to propose a reference framework of qualifications, the door has been opened to any kind of learning to be assessed thanks to the recognition of VPL in many European countries. People from the civil society, both professionals and/or volunteers, have already been associated to the assessment of learning outcomes as far as their activity may be concerned by the VPL.

A “new deal” of the validation of competences would consist in enhancing a circular approach of lifelong learning which is closely linked to its genuine spirit. Present learners may become future assessors and vice versa. This is part of the empowerment process: changing our perspectives and being able to play a different role. It is not enough to open door, opening spirits may be the other term of the alternative for enhancing a meaningful and sustainable validation of the competences.

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