



# Valuing Human Capital

## The case of refugees and migrants in Europe

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### Introduction

Linking learning to social participation, inclusion and career-opportunities, and the changes in prevailing attitudes on learning are important themes that allow us to understand the current transition towards a (lifelong) learning society.

#### *The learning society*

#### *Validation of Prior Learning (VPL)*

#### *Focus on higher educated refugees and migrants*

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#### *Conclusions*

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The 'learning society' can be defined as a society in which learning is considered important or valuable, where people are encouraged to continue to learn throughout their lives, and where the opportunity to participate in education and training is available to all. In such a society the role of human capital is all the more important since steering development and sustainable utilisation of human capital is not just a matter of investment in continuous learning but becomes more and more a matter of self-steered ownership of the individual her- and himself. This phenomenon is all the more apparent when we analyse this transition on the personal level of higher educated refugees and migrants, integrating their human capital in their 'new' country.

The process of Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) is at the heart of making the transition beneficial to all stakeholders. VPL is the instrumentation for recognizing and valuing what people have learned so far and linking these learning experiences to further development steps for someone in her<sup>2</sup> own context. The main driver for VPL is embedded in the learning and working processes in which the individual is engaged. So, VPL is more or less anchored in someone's learning and working history and future.

This *Policy Brief* looks at the systematics of Validating Prior Learning (VPL), its importance to the recognition and utilization of human capital and – especially - how higher education institutes (HEIs) can strengthen the participation of the human capital of refugees and migrants in their new country. The basis for this *Policy Brief* is a case-study analysis for the Erasmus<sup>+</sup> project *Validation for inclusion of new citizens in Europe (VINCE)*<sup>3</sup> on the transition of refugees and migrants to new careers in their new country. This analysis takes two forms: a country-analysis of the prevailing VPL-process in HEIs and a qualitative analysis of 43 in-depth case studies of individual migrants and refugees.

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2 Whenever there is mentioning of 'she' or 'her', this also means 'he', 'his' or 'him'. 😊

3 <http://vince.eucen.eu>.

**The learning society** The concept of ‘the learning society’ originated in the 1960/70s. In this era there was a growing need for skilled labour. This led to more attention in national policies on the role of education in managing the rise in ‘social and economic wealth’. Education was equated with lifelong learning and a significant and relevant means of transforming social and political life for this purpose (Gelpi, 1985; Hobsbawm, 1994). This called for a learning society built on the notions that learning is important and valuable and that all people need to invest continuously in their potential. This focus on learning – in those days one spoke in general about ‘education’ when actually addressing all forms of learning inside and outside of the formal education system – was articulated by the UNESCO in 1972 as follows:

*If learning involves all of one's life, in the sense of both time-span and diversity, and all of society, including its social and economic as well as its educational resources, then we must go even further than the necessary overhaul of 'educational systems' until we reach the stage of a learning society. For these are the true proportions of the challenge education will be facing in the future.* (Faure, et al, 1972, p. xxxiii).

**Validation of Prior Learning (VPL)** In such a learning society, the Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) acts as a building block for creating and facilitating lifelong learning. The added value of VPL in this is that it enables learners to (1) take into account their prior learning achievements and (2) create a personalised lifelong learning strategy when reflecting on these prior learning outcomes.

VPL operationalizes bottom-up steered learning-processes by individual learners in their own context. Therewith VPL opens up actual learner-steered learning perspectives. VPL steers people’s empowerment with its focus on the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one’s life. This implies control over resources and decisions and focuses on the voice of the people when they start participating and negotiating with the other actors in the learning arena on the why, how and what of further learning (Narayan, 2005). Such empowerment challenges the existing education system and demands the design of learning-made-to-measure in different settings and for different purposes.

The process of Validation of Prior Learning strengthens the role of the individual in shaping her learning perspectives. It can demonstrate the benefits of one’s learning in terms of profit (status, money), efficiency (time, customisation), and enjoyment. The learning-programme-independent nature of the assessment enhances the effects that VPL can create for personal objectives in terms of qualifications, career development and personal meaning (Duvekot, 2016). VPL is in most cases a process of four consecutive phases:

1. *Identification* of an individual’s learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning.
  2. *Documentation* of an individual’s learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning.
  3. *Assessment* of an individual’s learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning.
  4. *Certification* of the results of the assessment of an individual’s learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning in the form of a qualification, or credits leading to a qualification, or in another form, as appropriate.
- (Cedefop, 2015, p. 14)

This VPL-process in four phases offers an outlook to personal learning strategies in which the organisation-context and learning services are crucial for keeping up with the speed of individual competence-development.

**Two analyses** This policy brief is based on the outcomes of a case-study analysis that focuses on a key phenomenon in the transition of refugees/migrants to new careers in their new country: the process of Validation of Prior Learning (VPL).

The case-study analysis investigates the phenomenon from both the top-down or system-perspective as well as the bottom-up or individual perspective. The system is analysed on country-level across Europe and the input from 11 interviews with staff members involved in the

VPL-process in several countries; the analysis of the individual level is based on 43 in-depth case studies of migrants and refugees. The main questions to be answered are how and to what extent is VPL facilitated across countries in Europe and how is this accessible for the target group of higher educated refugees and migrants? The two groups are defined as *migrants within Europe* and *refugees coming from outside Europe*. Both groups are expected to undergo substantially the VPL-process and experience the same kind of impact on their learning-, career- and life-objectives in their new country. The objective of this analysis is to describe the state of the art of VPL in higher education institutes (HEIs) for the target groups, to analyse good practices and to recommend how VPL for refugees and migrants can be implemented effectively in Europe's HEIs.

*Focus on  
refugees and  
migrants in  
Europe's HEIs*

The number of refugees and migrants (newcomers) coming to Europe, escaping from wars or critical life conditions and looking for new life opportunities, has increased dramatically in recent years and is likely to continue growing in the coming years. These newcomers face many challenges in settling in Europe and among these are the obstacles to accessing the labour market or continuing their studies.

In this analysis the focus is on higher-educated refugees and migrants since their human capital potential can be validated effectively due to the uniformity of higher education levels and standards across Europe on the one hand and the needs of Europe's learning societies for a higher educated population on the other. The role of HEIs is not limited to helping refugees and migrants to better integrate into society; it also acts as a valuable platform for promoting social cohesion, solidarity, tolerance, diversity and human rights.

Migrants and refugees are in practice often prevented from enjoying their rights by many legal and practical barriers. One of the main challenges newcomers and refugees face is that, although they are often educated and skilled, their competences may not be recognised in the host society. There are many reasons for this: their skills and knowledge may not fit into predefined bureaucratic policies and procedures; documentation is lacking; or the curriculum they followed does not match certification structures in the host country. This hinders their access to the labour force and to continuing their studies, jeopardising their chances of fully integrating. In this perspective the VPL-process may help out.

*Country-  
analysis*

The data collected in 37 country-reports led to a grouping of 4 prevailing systems on country-level in which the four phases of the VPL-process are applied, ranging from *broadly* applied to *marginally* or *none*:

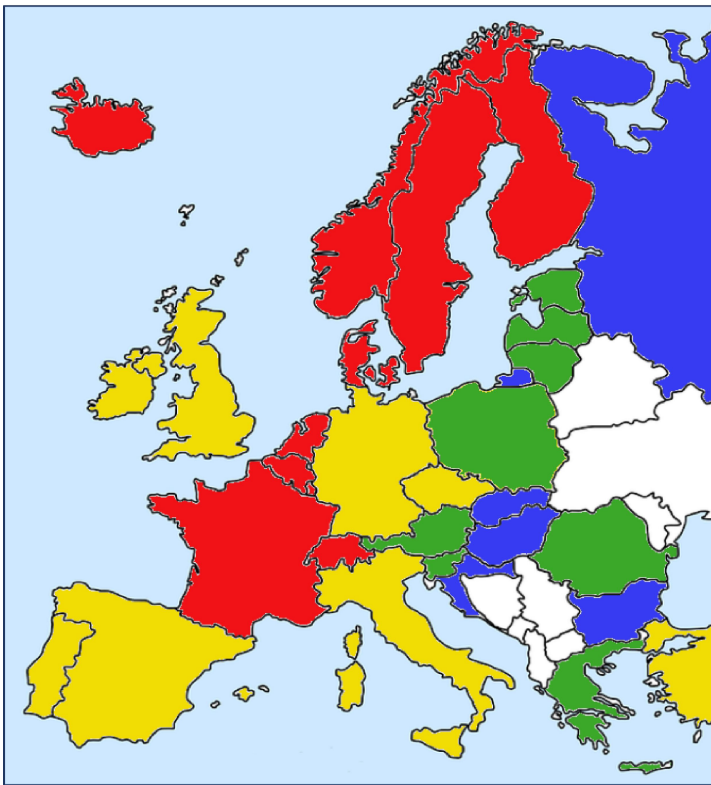
**Group 1** consists of countries having (1) a favourable legal framework for applying VPL in education and public and private sectors, (2) operationalised VPL in HEIs, able to take care of prior learning experiences of formal, non-formal AND informal nature, (3) funding available on nation AND sector and/or NGO levels and (4) opportunities for anchoring the outcomes of VPL to all systems in HE, labour market AND third sector. The countries in group 1 are mainly situated in the north and north-west of Europe: Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Iceland, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland.

**Group 2** consists of countries having (1) a favourable legal framework for applying VPL in education and public and private sectors, (2) operationalised VPL in HEIs, able to take care of prior learning experiences of formal and of non-formal OR informal nature, (3) funding available on national OR sector and/or NGO levels and (4) opportunities for anchoring the outcomes of VPL to two of the systems in HE, labour market OR third sector. Group 2 consists of countries spread across north-west, south and central Europe: Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

**Group 3** consists of countries having (1) a favourable legal framework for applying VPL in education and public and private sectors, (2) operationalised VPL in HEIs, able to take care of prior learning experiences of only a formal nature, (3) funding available only on national level and (4) opportunities for anchoring the outcomes of VPL to only one of the systems in HE, labour market OR third sector. Group 3 is spread across the central, eastern and south-east parts of Europe: Austria, the Baltic States, Cyprus, Greece, Liechtenstein, Malta, Poland, Romania and Slovenia.

## Group 4

### VPL-application in HEIs in European countries in 2017



### Individual analysis

On the level of individual refugees and migrants the main analytical aspects coming to the fore were agency of the individual, affordance by HEIs, information and guidance, the impact of the consecutive VPL-process phases and ownership of one's learning outcomes.

The individual case-analyses demonstrate that:

- The characteristics of policy development not only show the slowness of implementation of policies in the practice of HEIs, but also that an open dialogue on the opportunities of HE is conducive to the activation of the individual learner.
- In general, refugees and migrants are hesitant in accessing VPL-processes at first, but once informed, guided and reflective on their learning experiences, they clearly become empowered and engaged.
- Information provision on the potential benefits of VPL is crucial for the agency of the target groups. They feel informally valued whenever they are helped in demonstrating their prior learning and working experiences. They feel 'listened to' and are more encouraged to engage in participative actions in their new country.
- The target groups of refugees and migrants profit likewise from VPL in terms of psychology (empowerment, self-esteem), educational attainment (exemptions, -if available – tailored learning) and career-perspectives (clarity about social opportunities, tuning in to the best fit in personal experiences + HE-qualification + career-options).
- The target groups experience the same difficulties in formulating and proving their prior learning experiences as other students to be enrolled in HE. A main aspect in this difficulty is the dominant learning paradigm in which people were educated and disciplined. Like European students, refugees and migrants were educated in a *monological* education system in which the teacher is the knowledge-bearer and the pupil/student has to listen to the teacher's voice.

- Individual learners who took time to reflect on their own learning experiences strengthened their position in their dialogue on further learning with the HEI and/or employer. In most individual cases, the dialogue operated as a 'gap-closer' between the refugees/migrants and portfolio-trainer/teacher/employer; in this way, they managed to build a bridge to a personalised follow-up programme in one or more areas of life.
- Competences demonstrated by prior learning experiences – to be proven in the assessment – fill and colour the dialogue in the learning triangle for all stakeholders involved.
- The portfolio is the carrier of the VPL process. Guidance or mentoring in the documentation phase is clearly beneficial for the refugees/migrants.
- With the creation of a transparent portfolio of personal, prior learning experiences, the ownership of (lifelong) learning starts for the individual learner. By articulating one's learning achievements and reflecting on the value of them, by self-assessing one's strengths and weaknesses (SWOT) on that basis, self-efficacy becomes one of the motors for turning this retrospective ownership of learning into a dialogue for activating prospective learning.
- The supportive and facilitative role of NGOs is manifest, not only in funding VPL but also in providing information, guidance of refugees and migrants for VPL in HEIs. NGOs also play a stimulating role in building up affordance of VPL in HEIs for refugees and migrants. They do this by networking and lobbying. Therewith they can play a decisive role in convincing HEIs to afford VPL-facilities for the target groups.
- The return on investment of a structured portfolio-training for preparation of a VPL-procedure is beneficial for the target groups. The same goes for language training and bridging courses (acculturation and additional competence development for solving knowledge deficits).
- Assessment helps to connect the stakeholders in the learning triangle. This effect occurs in all the three forms of assessment that are analysed in the cases: *assessment of*, *for* and *as* learning, resp. summative, formative and reflective assessment.
- There is a real dynamic space between the system (top-down) and the process (bottom-up), but depending on the intended learning objective, results are always obtained for different stakeholders. If the system is in control, due to an *inside-out approach*, it is mainly the organisation and 'the school' who benefit from it; in the case of the process being prioritised in an *outside-in approach*, then the learner benefits.

**Conclusions** VPL is acknowledged for opening learning opportunities for refugees and migrants by recognising and valuing what they have learned so far in their lives. The objective of this analysis is answering the questions of how and to what extent VPL is facilitated in HEIs across Europe and how this is accessible for the target group of higher educated refugees/migrants.

**c1**  
**Information and guidance** The role of information provision on VPL-processes for accessing HE and thereafter the availability of counselling and guidance services plays an important role in the utilisation of VPL by the target groups. Information and guidance are the functions that are the so-called 'front-office' for having people's prior learning experiences recognised on HE-levels. HE-staff members not only need to be well-trained in guidance and counselling people but also need to be able to overlook the whole process of VPL including the further learning programming. This expertise is extended to the responsibility of providing adequate information and raising awareness of the potential value of one's learning achievements in accessing HE.

**c2**  
**Roles and response-bilities** The responsibilities of the stakeholders and actors in VPL are linked to specific purposes for engaging in VPL-processes. Many objectives can occur in a specific national or sector context, especially since the true impact of VPL lies in the combination of certification, strengthening one's self-esteem and the articulation of the competence-needs of learners. In this way, all stakeholders cooperate within a VPL-process in a holistic way by interlinking each other's objectives and responsibilities. Next to all stakeholders in and around HEIs taking their responsibility and offer access to HE with an open mind to the learning experiences of refugees and migrants, is the importance of creating impact of VPL on the individual level. This entails giving a voice to the learner. This works out best if the learner can get a good grip on social or economic perspectives with the assistance of the VPL-process. Creating perspective is, next to good-quality guidance and assessment, a critical success factor of VPL in HEIs.

c3 <i>Objectives and impact</i>	<p>The objectives and impact of VPL in HEIs are tied in with the four main rationales for integrating VPL in a specific national, sector or regional context: educational, employability, HRD and lifelong learning. The educational rationale in which obtaining exemptions for a partial or a full qualification prevails in most countries and regions. Next to that economically motivated usage of VPL on HE-levels that takes care of competence recognition and employability for career motives is a clear runner-up as main driver. The more socially engaged VPL is in fewer countries apparent but it's a strong driver for governments to face the challenge of dealing with competent but unqualified or underqualified target groups in society. VPL for participative aims in the third or volunteering sector or the civil society is least practiced; only in the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries where it is utilised for recognising indigenous values of minority groups or for strengthening the quality in volunteering and civil society activities, there is a clear focus on this level for practicing VPL in HEIs.</p>
c4 <i>Professionalism &amp; quality assurance</i>	<p>The expertise of VPL staff (portfolio guides, advisors and assessors) is very important in achieving maximum awareness of the value of personal learning experiences when refugees/migrants reach out to HE-levels. Their instrumental expertise equals the importance of them in creating motivation and ambition for accessing/applying VPL in HEIs. Furthermore, the quality assurance of a VPL-system depends on the clear formulation of what the expertise of VPL-staff entails, how this expertise is learned and maintained and how staff-members are embedded and accepted in qualification systems and systems of human resources management systems on the labour market and in the third sector.</p>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<p>A number of recommendations or challenges to anchoring VPL in HEIs for refugees and migrants can be formulated when overlooking the conclusions based on the information provided in the country cases as well as the individual cases.</p>
r1 <i>From policy to practice</i>	<p>Moving from policy to practice is imperative to creating more inclusive HEIs. VPL is recognisable as a key component for the individual's possibility to manage shifts in modern life in terms of lifelong learning and career-guidance. This is also the case for refugees and migrants trying to build up a career in a new country. To make VPL a core element in integration/participation in the new country, the individual needs information, guidance and counselling, emphasising both learning and work perspectives in order to secure longer term relevance and value for the individual.</p> <p>Strengthening VPL-practice entails upscaling the investment in raising-awareness of the value of prior learning experiences, information-provision on VPL-services offered (information, guidance, assessment) and strengthening the linkage of national qualification standards and occupational standards and coordination between national stakeholders and HEIs.</p>
r2 <i>Raising awareness and information provision</i>	<p>The awareness of the value of a VPL-approach in HEIs focused on learner needs and taking account of the value of not only formal but also informal and non-formal learning results depends on the consensus among all actors (target-group representatives, information officers, assessors, guides, teachers) in VPL-processes in and around HEIs. The actors can support awareness and consensus. Moreover, any actor can help strengthen information-provision to the target groups by reaching out to them directly or indirectly to their representatives/spokesmen in their new country.</p>
r3 <i>The learner's voice</i>	<p>Critical aspect in all approaches of HEIs is the importance of engaging designated target groups by making VPL a personalised approach. People need to be able to articulate their learning experiences, identify their personal competences and link these competences to perspectives and roles in society. The learner's voice is therewith more than the need of people to have their voices listened to but also need to articulate their own voice.</p> <p>The learner's voice highlights the need for ownership of learners and the ensuing inclusion of their preferences and possibilities – regarding settings, time, cost, progression – in the formulation of VPL-strategies and the execution of VPL-processes in HEIs. Good quality of guidance and assessment of the learner is essential in the VPL-process for including such</p>



individual ownership of learning experiences. The Institute for Personalized Learning in Wisconsin, USA advocates in its educational services for schools and educators that:

*The greatest gift to learners is to give them the tools, insights, and understanding necessary to be in charge of their own learning and lives. When learners understand how to channel their interest and curiosity, they gain the ability to motivate themselves. When learners begin to own their learning, they gain a prized possession to protect, build, and maintain for a lifetime.* (Rickabaugh, 2012)

Successfully applying VPL holds in this way a promise of creating social and/or economic perspective for people that can be linked to their intrinsic values and agency. Bray and McClaskey (2015) perceive such personalisation as the next development in the learning system based on the engaged, self-managing, learning individual operating in a supportive network, all within the modern, learning society. The offer of a shortened, self-steered and flexible learning path for obtaining HE-levels is in this respect more than formalising personal learning experiences; it's more an offer of personal empowerment in terms of strengthening life skills, incl. literacy and numeracy, and social participation in the learning society.

- r4*  
*Professionalising HEIs staff and research programmes*
- The expertise of portfolio guides, counsellors, advisors and assessors is very important in achieving maximum awareness of the value of personal learning, and creating motivation and ambition for VPL and learning/social opportunities in HEIs and society. HEIs should therefore invest in the creation and maintenance of occupational standards for VPL information-providers, -guides, -assessors and -managers. Even more, these standards should be linked to internal human resource management systems in HEIs and offer the chance for career-paths in HEIs for VPL-professionals.
- Next to career-paths in VPL-professionalisms, HEIs could also invest in research-programmes for VPL in educational, social and economic domains. Research is needed into the added value of VPL, among other things focused on its economic, financial and social effects.
- r5*  
*Demand articulation for perspective*
- When achieving a specific outcome of VPL for HE-competent refugees and migrants, it is a critical success factor to offer actual social or economic perspective. Sector-based and regional VPL-practices present successes (Singh, 2015), especially if involved organisations/companies ensure that their formulation of demands for functions and activities on HE-levels is transparent. This strategy works especially well when focusing on tackling skills gaps or offering further learning paths.
- r6*  
*Further learning options*
- As a follow-up on VPL-processes, tailored, further learning options need to be offered by HEIs. These options need to be flexible in order to boost people's desire to keep on learning. The VPL approach benefits from optimising other forms of learning: other learning environments and forms of learning must be formulated and/or utilised more effectively, since the outcome of a VPL-process also shows which learning environment and/or form of learning is best for an individual. This may include (combinations of) work-based learning, mentoring/tutoring, self-steered learning, distance learning, peer-learning, and so on.
- r7*  
*The dialogue on validation and learning*
- An open dialogue on validation and learning between the individual and the learning and/or working systems can be effective when the co-makship of the individual in shaping her own future is truly accepted and afforded (Duvekot, 2017). The subsequent open dialogue is able to connect - retrospectively - the learning history of higher educated refugees and migrants with - prospectively - what they still need to learn in their new country.
- VPL can be a strong guiding vision and tool by affording an open dialogical process of validation and learning between the learner and the teacher/employer in both the validation as well as the learning process:

1. In the validation process, the testing (summative) and advisory (formative) functions of validation in the dialogue between (the portfolio of) the learner and the (qualification standards of the) teacher and/or the (occupational standards of the) employer are used to recognize, value and accredit learning outcomes. The learner is assisted in this process by test forms that are product- or process-oriented. Process-oriented means that learning outcomes are assessed integrated and interlinked, whereas in product-oriented validation this is based on the value of the learning outcome in itself.
2. The learning process aims at offering learning that cannot (yet) be realized through validation or of which the learner believes that this learning is desirable. This process is personalized in terms of content, form and meaning. The learner can have a say in the design of the personal learning trajectory within the framework of the study program. This goes as well for refugees and migrants as for any other learner.

### Overall conclusion

The overall conclusion is that VPL still has a long way to go before it is embedded all over Europe's HEIs. Good practices from Danish, Dutch, French and Norwegian HEIs demonstrate that much is possible in affording refugees and migrants when they need or want access to HE. Offering VPL as an open gateway for linking a person's formally, informally and non-formally acquired competences to a HE-programme is one of the critical success factors in these practices. Furthermore, offering the remaining competences to be acquired after the assessment in a tailored and flexible learning path is the other critical success factor. Both critical success factors depend strongly upon the willingness and the ability to recognise the competences acquired 'outside of academia'; that's more a matter of ambassadorship of committed VPL-staff in HEIs, open mindedness and embracement of the dialogue of validation and learning than of assessment-methodology or interview-techniques.

Least of all, this analysis gives credits to Paolo Freire's statement in the 1970s that learning needs to be addressed as a developmental and dialogical process of 'action-reflection-praxis' of and by people (i.e. teachers and learners). It should be an anti-depositary process, contrasting the traditional 'banking-system' (Freire, 1970). Such processes of dialogical validation and learning suit every learner, inclusive of refugees and migrant with prior learning experiences. With 'banking' Freire meant a process in which knowledge is directly transferred to learners with the teacher as the sole distributor of knowledge and the learner as the passive receiver of this knowledge. Instead of 'banking' the ground floor for learning can better be 'portfolio-ing', in which learning is based on personal, prior learning experiences and the self-management of recurring learning processes.

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