

The skills audit – an access route to the validation process

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Abstract

Individuals' perspective is vital in the process of planning and providing career guidance services. Our aim is to underline the importance of this factor and argue that the skills audit may constitute an entryway to the validation process. This paper refers to the case study research method in the scope of which we focused on "Kierunek Kariera" (Direction Career) project as the part strictly related to the skills audit in the Małopolska region. On the basis of the biographical, in-depth interviews conducted with individuals who participated in the skills audit, we will present the significance of the individuals' perspective, especially with regard to further educational opportunities and chances on the labour market. We will also demonstrate the method itself to illustrate the influence of the well-conducted guidance on individual lives. Thus, the paper may serve as a source of inspiration for career guidance practitioners or an information tool.

Keywords: VPL, validation process, skills audit, career guidance

Introduction

The validation process of prior non-formal and informal learning is complex. To begin with, it is supposed to consist of five phases (Duvekot, 2014, p. 33). Numerous parties are involved in realising the different phases of the process. What is more, various institutions also take responsibility for the VPL process (Berlin Declaration on VPL, 2019). Each country has its own regulations, some of which designate the institutions responsible for the validation process and its execution, including very specific validation phases in the country concerned (Duvekot, 2007).

Taking the individuals' perspective into account, we would like to underline that it is crucial to be guided throughout this complex process. The career guidance and properly trained advisers play an important role in the VPL process. In the initial validation phase or prior to the VPL process, the adviser is critical. The moment when a person reflects the past professional and educational experience or the development opportunities available is the "preparation" phase (Duvekot, 2014, p. 33). When contacting a professional adviser, usually for the first time it is necessary to allow the individual to self-assess one's skills, set goals, incorporate experience and skills into a new framework, as qualifications to be confirmed or acquired through further education.

Our purpose is to highlight this factor and demonstrate that career guidance is a crucial element of the validation process, especially for individuals who may not feel confident enough to get through the VPL process without support. Thus, one of the possible entryways in this context is the skills audit. The method was recommended in the fundamental document for the VPL in Europe – Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, in which a ‘skills audit’ was defined as:

“a process aimed at identifying and analysing the knowledge, skills and competences of an individual, including his or her aptitudes and motivations in order to define a career project and/or plan a professional reorientation or training project; the aim of a skills audit is to help the individual analyse his/her career background, to self-assess his/her position in the labour environment and to plan a career pathway, or in some cases to prepare for the validation of non-formal or informal learning outcomes”. (The Council of the European Union, p. 5).

As an element of a few VPL systems, for example in Germany, Netherlands or the United Kingdom (Institute of Educational Research, 16.01.2020), it was also introduced in one of the oldest validation of non-formal and informal prior learning systems in Europe – France – as a specific tool (Charraud, 2007). Currently, it has become an integral part of systemic solutions there and is known as “bilan de competencies” (Charraud, p. 153).

Our main reference point is the “Kierunek Kariera” project (Direction Career Project), which covers the idea of ‘bilans kompetencji/skills audit’ in the Malopolska Region, focusing on the impact of well-conducted guidance on individual lives, especially their learning and working opportunities.

Career guidance

Nowadays, the socio-economic development of society depends on lifelong learning, which principle states that initial education is no longer sufficient (Duvekot, 2007, p. 3). The lifelong learning phenomena strongly refers to the recognition and validation of prior non-formal and informal learning. Thus, VPL is expected to become the key element among institutions and individuals contributing to the development of a learning society. This is in line with both the European Union’s recommendations on LLL policy and the Cedefop recommendations. Moreover, it is necessary to establish a validation system that is combined with comprehensive life guidance:

“(…) validation and guidance are two important tools to assist individuals, organisations and Member States in adapting to the new reality and creating real lifelong learning systems. Career guidance and counselling play a major role in managing people’s transitions, while validation can assist in fulfilling people’s full potentials by making visible and providing value to all learning an individual has acquired” (Cedefop, 2019, p. 7).

In this perspective, career guidance may be viewed as a kind of brokerage – individuals' needs are placed first, while the individuals benefit first hand from the guidance services. As career guidance is a service that addresses the needs of society and an answer to the requests of policymakers or authorities' recommendations, it has a strong influence on its recipients (Watts et al., p. 243). What is more, it is one of many public services financed by public funds. Thereby, there is a sharp competition between career guidance and other public services to gain money (Mayston, p. 14). Reasonable funding is needed, on the other hand, to enable the individuals to adopt a holistic approach to counselling.

It may prove to be a great challenge when career guidance is regarded as a service in a holistic context. Then lifelong learning and life advising are intended to be inseparable (Kławsiuć-Zduńczyk, 2016, p. 89). It is impossible to exclude the individual's lifetime experiences at different stages, whether occupational, educational or personal. In the scope of learning and counselling, non-formal and informal learning must be taken into account. Real life is not static: a person's education and professional career are subject to many turnovers that leave an open path for holistic learning in an organised form, during leisure time or at the workplace, in combination with professional guidance (There, p. 90).

In the biographical narrative approach (Kaźmierska, 2004), which turns out to be a core method used in holistic life guidance and career guidance, turning points are key to understanding individuals' perspective (Kławsiuć-Zduńczyk, 2016; Laudénbach & Lis, 2019). By examining a person's life more closely, the counsellor provides feedback that may help the individual make use of past experiences in their future learning and working opportunities. Thus, the role of career counsellor entails supporting the client in the process of transferring past experiences into planned learning goals and professional aims. It is a complex process, requiring the integration of all learning experiences as well as turning points that could both encourage life learning and lead to career and education breaks (Kławsiuć-Zduńczyk, 2016, p. 90).

Michael Eraut (2002) presents the typology of individuals' non-formal learning: *implicit learning*, *reactive learning* and *deliberative learning*. Each of these forms is incorporated differently into their future behaviour. While *deliberative learning* goes hand in hand with planned learning goals and opportunities, the other two types of non-formal learning appear less consciously. *Implicit learning* leaves the individual unaware of previous experiences. *Reactive learning*, on the other hand, does not help the individual plan their next steps but helps them prepare for the emergent learning opportunities (Eraut, p. 116).

Accordingly, there is a significant need for career guidance, especially when non-formal learning takes the form of *implicit learning* or *reactive learning*. The implementation of VPL systems in many European countries was combined with career counselling systems. Both European recommendations (Council of the European Union, Cedefop) and good practices (Duvekot, 2007) illustrate that there is and always will be a strong cooperation and bond between validation processes and guidance services. Building and strengthening this link is of paramount importance for the validation

system to function properly and develop a learning society. Therefore, the methods for career guidance that might be an entryway for VPL process are highly valuable.

The skills audit – case study

The Kierunek Kariera project

The Kierunek Kariera (Direction Career) project is being implemented in the Malopolska Region as an initiative of the Regional Labour Office in Cracow. The project aims to assist people in developing skills and gaining qualifications the skills and gain qualifications. The project is dedicated to people who are actively engaged in the labour market, particularly those with lower qualifications, who have not attended higher education. It is estimated that, from 2016 to 2023, while this initiative is ongoing, 46,000 people will have made use of the skills audit and/or additional education opportunities that are also included in the project. Implementation of the project will change attitudes in the field of lifelong learning (LLL), attracting foreign project participants. What is more, it will allow individuals to control their own career path and prepare for effective validation, by using portfolio as a technique and the skills audit as a method.

The skills audit

The skills audit enables the individuals to prepare the portfolio or e-portfolio and to identify the potential competitive advantages in the labour market. Career counsellors assist and support the individuals, help them identify their interests, set a direction in which they want to grow and recognise the skills they should and want to improve (objectives). To achieve these objectives, various tools are used throughout the process, such as biographical and behavioural interviewing techniques, diagnostic tests, competency tests and others taken from vocational counselling (methods).

Combining individual reflection and self-evaluation was crucial in designing the tools and then acquiring certain competences to collect practical experience regarded as the source of individuals' skills – competences – qualifications. Another form of support was then established. The training vouchers offer participants an opportunity to improve their qualifications. Furthermore, this mechanism requires the person concerned to take responsibility, giving them an independent choice of a training company and relying on the quality of services up to date September 2019. Almost 16,500 people took part in the project as a whole and 1,716 participated in an in-depth skills audit.

Support of the validation process demands a great deal of the qualified advisory staff. The skills audit adviser helps those interested in obtaining qualifications to identify and document their learning outcomes. The preliminary guidelines for the process of identifying and documenting learning activities, and the skills audit methods were presented at consultation meetings with the Malopolska Partnership for Lifelong Learning and at seminars, aiming, in particular, at the target group of professional

advisers from different institutions, HR specialists, trainers, training institution owners, NGO representatives and validation contractors.

In the pilot validation project of the Regional Labour Office, Cracow was responsible not only for developing a method and tools for use in the skills audit but also for holding seminars on these issues. The seminar programme included carrying out the validation process, more precisely the aspects related to facility administration (e.g. material resources, premises, personnel competence, selection criteria for the methods and tools). During the seminars, participants were introduced to and practised the principles of biographical and behavioural intelligence, a tool commonly used to prepare the skills audit sheet.

The seminars aimed to present topics related to the newly developed integrated system of qualifications, as well as the role of the Polish Qualifications Framework in this system, which, in turn, turned out to be the starting point for creating qualification descriptions and designing the validation process. Participants admitted that the presence of the representatives of various educational institutions, the labour market and training, and entrepreneurs in the various sectors was of enormous value during the seminar. This enabled them to share information and exchange notes, which resulted in a more effective participant response towards issues related to the subject of the skills audit, vocational training qualifications, career guidance and the validation process.

It is crucial to organise interdisciplinary seminar groups in the future to achieve the desired effect of experiences and knowledge exchange. Seminars and training courses may also enhance the cooperation and networking of institutions. In turn, this will help increase the availability of information on the validation process and skills audit for clients of different institutions, and ensure the quality and reliability of the information provided. As the starting point, it will provide common knowledge of validation service policies and guidelines.

A permanent part of the seminar will be a block devoted to learning outcomes and, in the future, instructions on how to use the Integrated Qualification Register. The courses for ready-to-use assessment methods will be modular and based on e-learning. The skills audit, which is carried out by professional advisers, plays a very important role. This method is educational, aiming to motivate people who do not have the knowledge or required certificates. After a few (usually two or three) meetings with the adviser, individuals are able to identify their competences, based on experience shared, and distinguish the evidence of learning outcomes. They also receive feedback on their educational and professional potential. The time factor is crucial. Customers will be able to use advisory services at the agreed time especially if they are in paid employment. It is recommended that both parties set the timeframe.

The skills audit procedure

The skills audit is divided into three stages: the preliminary, research and summary stage. To participate in the whole process, a candidate is required to complete an application form (independently or with support) available online or as a copy. The graph

below illustrates the skills audit procedure and subsequent steps, as well as implementation methods. It is then followed by a more detailed description of applied methodology (Bodzińska-Guzik et al., 2015).

The preliminary stage

Services offered in the Kierunek Kariera (Career Direction) project are interrelated but the main participation requirement is the counselling session as a short or in-depth skills audit. Both cases involve discussion with a career counsellor for approximately one to one and a half hours in a goal-oriented, brief counselling session. During the meeting, participants are informed about the project activities and the scope of the proposed type of skills audit, in accordance with the agreed objective of cooperation.

Depending on a person's needs and expectations, the counselling service may be one meeting at this stage with a preliminary evaluation of their educational and occupational situation and their need for training. It may also be continued as part of an in-depth, more extended module.

Research stage

In case of the in-depth skills audit process, the first meeting is followed by several other meetings (two to four on average, each lasting up to six hours and usually spread throughout the year). Their frequency depends on the feasibility of scheduling a face-to-face encounter, given the other responsibilities of both parties. Sometimes they may take place as one or two long meetings that integrate subsequent parts of the skills audit procedure. Between the meetings participants generally have tasks to complete on their own, activating a moment of self-reflection.

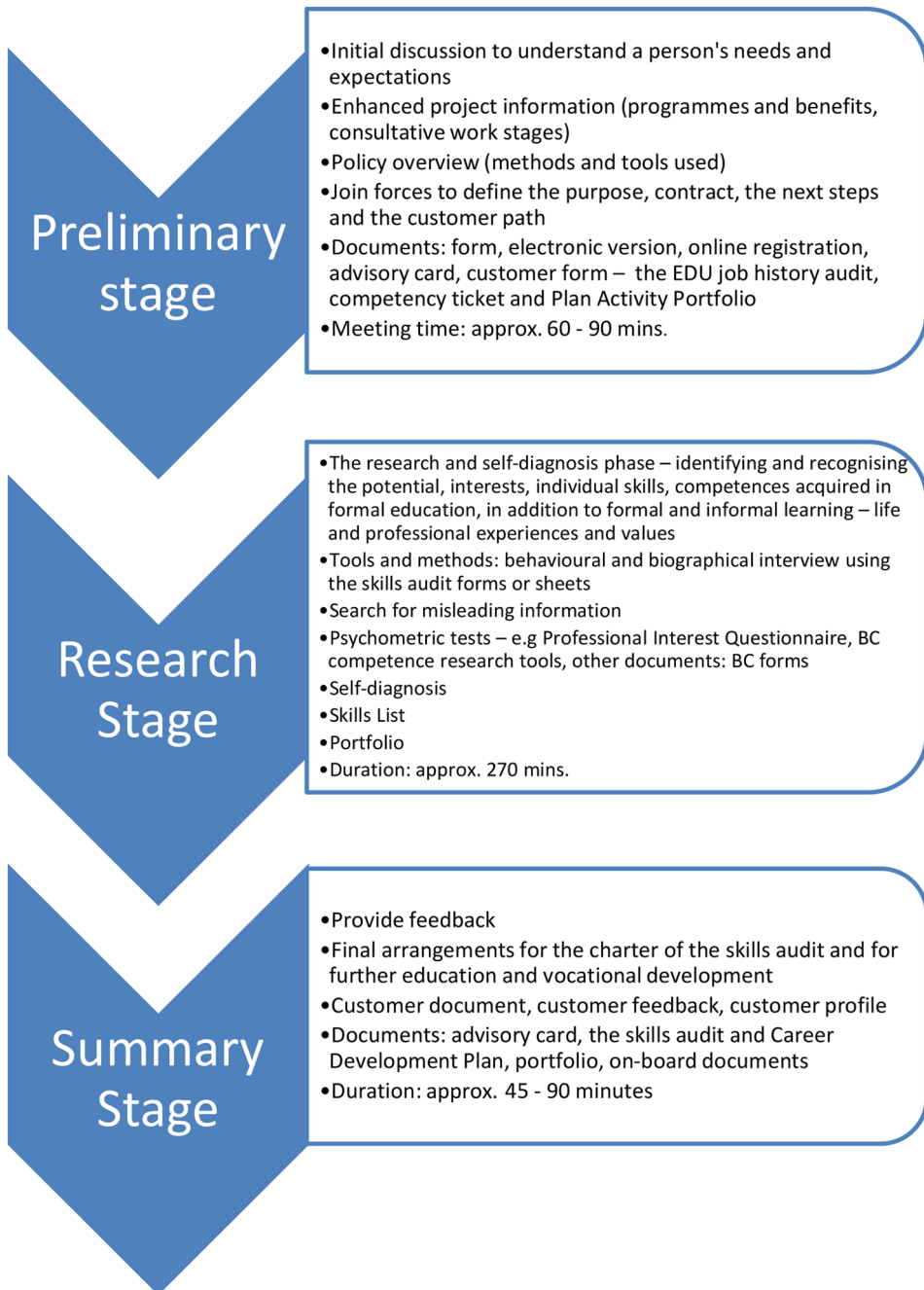


Figure 1: The main steps of the skills audit method (Source: own elaboration)

Methodologies applied during this stage include biographical and behavioural interviews.¹

As far as **biographical interviewing** (Juszczak, Bodzińska-Guzik et al., 2015; Barabasch & Marrill, 2014) is concerned, its aim is to establish participants' experience in different areas of their life (educational, professional, non-professional or as a hobby) and propose further action in the context of the competency identification and documentation process. The interview takes about 60 minutes and a counsellor may schedule another meeting with a participant if necessary. When preparing for the interview, the counsellor works with the list of questions and, during the meeting itself, they may also add new ones that will help analyse the information in detail, as it is important from the point of view of the career audit process. The information obtained during this type of interview includes:

- The course of education (e.g. schools, courses, experience outside school, diplomas and awards, areas of study interesting for a participant);
- Professional activity (e.g. work during school/studies, first job and subsequent work, undocumented work experience, occupied positions, favourite activities at work);
- Personal area (family, hobbies, interests, associations, activities in organisations, health condition with regard to pre-planned development activities, important facts of life, successes and failures, like-dislike tasks, context);

At the beginning of the interview (contract) in the skills audit process, individuals are informed that it only serves to verify any additional sources of their skills, including those that have not been disclosed so far. Discussing personal areas is voluntary and a person has the right to reveal only the information and level of detail they prefer. The person may also refuse to talk about this or ask to end the questions at any time.

The aim of **behavioural interviewing**, (Jurek, 2012) in turn, is to identify a person's competences developed by experiences and to plan further activities in the career audit process. The interview is based on a scenario in which the questions are structured from general to specific (funnel technique), thereby covering the areas of professional experience, personal life, key experiences and life events. The individuals are also asked to present the way they document their knowledge, skills and social competences discussed during the interview. To gather the relevant information, the counsellor uses the STAR interview technique (situation, task, action, result) and incorporates it into the document. The skills audit card is a table divided into three columns: competences, experiences and documents proving them.

The individual's task in the process is to engage in self-reflection, compile their experiences, evidence, documents and gather information about their education, job, qualification, work with the adviser to outline their competences that may possibly be developed by training and then validated. Moreover, the person makes a list of their competences and an individual development plan, specifying the skills that need im-

¹ The skills audit method was developed as part of a pilot project on qualifications, validation and quality assurance, run by the RLO in Cracow with the Educational Research Institute, 2013–2015.

proving. The adviser supports the person in the process of recalling their educational, professional and life background, pointing out that skills may result from acquired experience. Where suitable, the career counsellors also apply other tools, such as questionnaires and tests, to recognise professional interests, examine competences (e.g. professional interest) or identify participants' values (e.g. Schein's test). During the process, the adviser gives the feedback orally and prepares the written form.

Those who benefited from the creation of a skills audit sheet confirmed that they had not been aware of the value of their experience before creating the portfolio. Furthermore, the counselling service also proved to be of educational merit, informing participants about the possibilities of confirming their competences and obtaining certificates that could prove useful on the labour market and later in life (Bodzińska-Guzik et al., 2015).

Performing the skills audit in accordance with the procedure described above expects both high-level qualifications and experience of the adviser to provide the professional guidance. The comprehensive approach, familiarity with the tools and the combination of behavioural and biographical interviews is complemented by a broad and current knowledge of labour market opportunities, training markets and validation systems. Thus, it is a very complex role, calling for specific qualifications. With regard to description of the method and the skills required for its execution in the Polish Integrated Qualification Register, a new market qualification non-professional or as a hobby (Integrated Qualification Register, 20.01.2020).

The impact of the skills audit on individuals' further opportunities – an empirical study

The aim of the case study was to examine whether the skills audit could be the entry-way to the validation process. Hence, we concentrated on the individuals' perspective concerning their lives and "courses of actions" in their story. Therefore, we decided to conduct the qualitative research based on a biographical narrative interview, which turned out to be the optimal approach. We focused on investigating person's experiences, the significance attached to these experiences today and plans they have for the future (Rosenthal, p. 49). What is more, we have decided to make reference to the common project study and interview to cover all important aspects.

To begin with, one of many tasks in the Erasmus+ project "Effectiveness of VPL Policies and Programmes for Labour Market Inclusion and Mobility (EffectVPL)" was developing the manual, based on the biographical in-depth interviews with individuals who participated either in the VPL process or the quasi-validation process. Four countries includes: Denmark, Germany, Poland, and Turkey.

This study helped us analyse the impact of the skills audit on individuals' further opportunities. The research was carried out using the tools developed and tested for this project but adapted to the needs of the study group in Poland.

Methodology – tool and sample

As part of the project work, an interview guide was compiled on conducting in-depth biographical interviews with those who have experienced validation.

In Poland, the guide was tested on two participants in the abovementioned pilot project of VPL in Malopolska. They were at different levels of formal education during the VPL process.

From June 2017 to February 2018 in the EffectVPL project, 14 interviews were carried out with those who had passed the validation process. Interviewees invited to the survey took part in VPL in the pilot project (2) either certified their qualifications through an extramural examination (7) or succeeded in their skills audit (4) as part of the Kierunek Kariera (Career Direction) project. One interviewee passed the validation process by relying on the portfolio method in a professional association.

Interviews, each lasting about an hour, were carried out among those who had been through the skills audit and accepted the invitation to participate in the study. Due to the difficulties of accessing the study group and the exploratory nature of research, it was decided to select a research sample on the basis of a survey. Both male and female interviewees took part. Participants' educational background varied from basic vocational school to university graduates. The study group was also diverse in age as the interviewees were in their thirties or sixties.

Results

The interviews with four clients who undertook the in-depth skills audit in the Kierunek Kariera project enriched the experiment, providing a plethora of information. There was significant discussion with people from different educational backgrounds, from basic vocational school to higher education, and varying viewpoints due to the diversity of age and generations (from the early thirties to the mid-sixties). Our participants revealed a number of professional, educational and occupational anecdotes during the interviews. Their current occupations, which are included in the table above, are just one episode in their entire life story.

We asked participants to share their life story with emphasis on their educational background, including non-school education and career paths. The participants were open to cooperating and admitted that it was easier for them to do so the second time. Finally, during the interview, one individual spontaneously referred to the skills audit, which turned out to be a breakthrough. Reflection on the process as a whole and its impact on their lives appeared positive. Depending on the person, the experience was more or less significant in their lives. It was certainly a turning point for every participant.

The perception of the process components was equally positive. The portfolio method is commonly used as part of the skills audit. This method enables self-reflection and is responsible for demonstrating professional experience. This may therefore be in the form of certificates, documents or recommendation letters. At the end, with the adviser contribution, a set of competences is presented, covering participants'

strengths and competitive advantages. This indicates an individual development plan and competences for improvement, acquisition or development.

The counsellor becomes a solid support in transferring participants' educational, professional and life background in the context of experience, skills and competences resulting from these experiences. Despite appearing to be long and exhausting, interviewees percept the process favourably. *"The audit I took part in was well planned. Meetings – three times, agreed time, reviewing documents, refreshing my professional and educational history but, in return, I received external feedback,"* said the male salesman. *"I saw how many skills I had, while the adviser helped me gain a true/realistic assessment of further opportunities open to me,"* he continued.

People who benefited from the skills audit often shared the reflection that they were not even aware of the value of their experience in building a portfolio. Thus, the counselling service proved educational significance for them to learn about the possibilities of confirming their competences and obtaining certificates that may be useful in the labour market. *"After meeting with a career counsellor: I found out that I had more options that I had thought/my situation was better than I had thought."* the nurse said. The meetings showed her that she knew a great deal, encouraging her to fill in the gaps in her qualifications and find the strengths in her complex knowledge in the field of emergency medical services, for instance.

In general, participants in the skills audit assessed it positively. No doubts about the process itself (duration, timeframe or intervals between specific meetings) affected the positive feedback. None of the respondents claimed that the audit had had a negative effect on any aspect of their lives, with the majority indicating that it had had a positive impact on their career development and education.

Thus, the preliminary conclusions of the individuals' perspective of the skills audit are as following:

- The majority of respondents have seen a positive impact on their lives with regard to both their career and educational paths;
- Nobody observed any negative impact;
- The VPL process proved to be an opportunity for the interviewees;
- In general, VPL favours major changes at different stages of life, not only in individuals' careers.

Conclusions

All in all, integrating the two services: the validation of prior non-formal and informal learning, and career guidance constitutes the key message of this paper. Whereas each of them, separately, provides a significant value for individuals and society, the coexistence and systemic solution strengthen the synergy, allowing beneficiaries to notice it clearly. The assumption is still more compelling when viewed in conjunction with Cedefop publication (Cedefop, 2019), which highlights to close relation between VPL and guidance.

The emphasis in this study was placed on the fact that career counselling services are much more popular than VPL. Thus, career guidance may be perceived as a source of information on the validation service. As the information tool, the career counselling process not only provides information about the VPL as such but also about the possibilities of validation for validation providers and particular individuals. Moreover, career or life guidance may constitute the turning point that could help precisely identify skills for the validation process, thereby recognising and rewarding qualifications. After all, the individuals' skills may subsequently become more noticeable on the labour market.

This brings us to the fundamental conclusion of this paper. The skills audit might serve as the entryway to the validation process. The combination of several methodologies and approach methods, eclectic as it may seem, is well suited to either validation or guidance processes.

“To understand the relationship between validation and lifelong guidance, it is necessary to compare their distinct activities, bearing in mind that neither service has a single standardised method” (Cedefop, 2019, p. 14).

The lack of standardised method – typical of both combined services – allows greater flexibility and the use of distinct activities, thereby bringing tremendous advantages. Consequently, both processes require professional specialists with certified qualifications and experience as the quality content depends on the counsellors. Career advisers are responsible for providing feedback and information on educational opportunities, while motivating and offering VPL as appropriate. The key element is the feedback itself, however. Hence, the adviser's role is not to inform individuals about the skills they possess on the basis of the interview but to elicit the skills of the individual in the light of the opportunities on the modern world labour market. This is challenging and rewarding at the same time.

This study proves that individuals' perspectives on the skills audit and guidance, which led to the validation in general, are perceived as valuable. Although the main aim is occupational and/or educational, due to its distinct character, it is perceived as a milestone in their entire life, not only on their educational or professional path. Receiving feedback on reliable self-characteristics activates consciousness and facilitates entering the labour market. Thus, their skills and experiences are converted into qualifications and, after training, may be validated within the VPL process.

To conclude, the skills audit is a complex method that may serve as an entryway to the validation process. When deployed, it 1) meets clients' (individual) expectations and 2) responds to EU recommendations on the systemic coordination of both systems: validation and guidance.

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