

The individual perspective on VPL. A comparison of experiences from Germany, Poland, Denmark and Turkey.

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Abstract

The validation of prior non-formal and informal learning (VPL) is central to the EU's approach of lifelong learning. It aims to enhance the employability, labour market opportunities and educational perspectives of disadvantaged individuals on the labour market, such as low-skilled, unemployed and migrant workers. VPL is seen and conceptualised as a tool to improve social inclusion and the labour market mobility of all age groups. At the same time, it increases the transparency and usability of informal learning outcomes. This paper emphasises the individual perspective on VPL in Germany, Poland, Denmark and Turkey. Going beyond the policy level, it is necessary to focus on the individual benefit of a validation process. The paper links institutional VPL practice based on the national validation policy with the concrete benefits to the individuals who have started or completed a validation process. This comparative analysis of the four European countries, with their varying regions and socio-cultural context, shows the differences between national understandings and practices of VPL and their impact on individuals.

Keywords: Validation of prior learning, biographical research, informal learning

Introduction

The validation and recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning (VPL) is a priority of the European Union's (EU) educational policies and central to its understanding of lifelong and life-wide learning. The aim is to strengthen the flexibility of learning pathways to increase labour market inclusion and mobility across Europe. One key objective thereby is to enhance the labour market opportunities and educational perspectives of disadvantaged individuals, such as low-skilled, unemployed, migrant workers, refugees and individuals with restricted labour market and learning opportunities. In this context, VPL is seen and conceptualised as a tool to improve social inclusion and the labour market mobility of all age groups. At the same time, this approach emphasises the centrality of the individual by focusing on their needs, interests and benefits (Cedefop, 2015).

In the past two decades, many different VPL initiatives have been started and implemented at the national and European level, thereby leading to the significant advancement of VPL, particularly in terms of creating policy frameworks and piloting validation methods and procedures (Colardyn & Bjørnavold, 2004; Andersson, Fejes & Song-Ee, 2004; Diedrich, 2013; Harris, Wihak & Van Kleef, 2014). Nevertheless, VPL in Europe presents a fragmented picture with some countries not yet having engaged in the process (Haasler, Laudenbach & Anslinger, 2018). While continued efforts at various levels and the development of common European principles for VPL seek to move from fragmentation to stronger coherence, limited evidence exists concerning the impact and effectiveness of validation and what benefits individuals who have completed a validation of their prior learning actually derive from it.

In this paper, we elaborate on the effectiveness of VPL policies and practice in Germany, Poland, Denmark and Turkey. The focus is thereby placed on the benefits of VPL for the individual, the perception of the process and its connection to the educational system and labour market. In the first part, we outline the national VPL approaches in the four countries. In the second part, we analyse biographical interviews with individuals who completed different types of validation processes. We discuss the contrasting experiences in the four countries and the predominant benefits offered within the national VPL system. We compare the content of the interviews focusing on four dimensions: the feeling of improvement, the description of the VPL process, the linking of the VPL process to the educational system (including new educational opportunities) and to the labour market (including new employment opportunities).

The theoretical framework and underlying assumptions

As mentioned above, within the EU the validation systems vary from member state to member state. Due to this variation, we have to consider these influencing factors when analysing the effect of VPL on individuals in the EU. It is necessary to understand the national context of VPL and hence to understand the effect of VPL on the individual level. Therefore, we chose to narrow the scope of analysis to Germany, Poland, Denmark and Turkey. The four countries represent different European regions as well as contrasting socio-cultural contexts, which influence the educational and labour market. The findings on the validation systems in Germany, Poland, Denmark and Turkey are based on unpublished Policy Reports that have been developed during the ongoing Erasmus+ project “Effectiveness of VPL Policies and Programmes for Labour Market Inclusion and Mobility – Individual and Employer Perspectives (EffectVPL)”. The countries were chosen according to the different stages of their implementation of VPL policies at the beginning of the project period.

As we focus on the linking of individual perspectives with the VPL systems in the four countries, we outline our underlying assumptions briefly. Following von Felden and Schmidt-Lauffe (2015), we maintain that individual life courses are shaped by institutional arrangements and ascriptions. As Kohli (1985, 2003) argues, it is institu-

tions such as the education system, the labour market or the pension insurance scheme that roughly shape our lives. The individual's life course is arranged around the work system and must be organised to fit into the system. At the same time, this individualised conception of the life course corresponds to the activating labour market policies that have been developed under the EU's approach to employability. In this context, these individual characteristics have to conform to the needs of the labour market.

At this point, we can link the validation of prior learning to our biographical approach: the individual must have biographical competences to adapt to the labour market and frame their skills and working experiences throughout the work system. This individualised process must be examined from a biographical perspective. By adopting a biographical research approach, we aim to outline these perspectives in the respective work system. Thus, we are interested in how individuals cope with changes in their lives. Moreover, we endeavour to indicate the effects of those changes on their personal labour and educational situation. As Duvekot et al. (2007) argue, VPL comprises an empowering effect. This means that the individual defines their competences through the validation process, thereby becoming aware of and empowered by their "employability-potential" (Duvekot et al., 2007, p. 9). For our analysis, we focus on VPL as (1) the recognition of foreign degrees as equal to the qualifications in the host country, (2) the validation of competences, granting admission to an external examination of vocational education and training (VET) and (3) the validation of competences and career guidance.

We chose this biographical perspective to reflect the effectiveness of European policies. Thus, we link the policy level with the individual level, hereby shedding light on the impact of European policies on the individual. Consequently, we define effectiveness as the improvement of an individual's personal employment situation either (1) by receiving official recognition in the respective labour market or (2) by having their competences validated and thus being granted access to further education.

Our analysis is based on 25 semi-structured interviews with persons who passed the validation process and were conducted in Germany, Poland, Denmark and Turkey¹ in the period from June 2017 to February 2018. The interviews were conducted between several weeks to one year after the interviewees had completed their VPL process. The interviews, each lasting about an hour, were carried out among individuals who took part in VPL processes of different kinds. Due to the difficulty of access to the study group and the exploratory nature of research, it was decided to pick out a research sample on the basis of voluntary selection. Using different channels of communication (emails, telephone calls, leaflets in the VPL centres), we contacted former VPL beneficiaries. The participants' educational background varied from basic vocational school to university graduates. The majority of interviewees had at least a high school degree. In Turkey, the participants were generally employed as skilled workers. Half of the employees who benefited from the certification process in this study had attained a lower education level or completed primary school (50.7%). About a third of

1 The interviews were conducted as part of the Erasmus+ project EffectVPL.

the participants had a high school degree (31.9%), while a minority had a two-year (11.6%) or four-year (5.8%) higher education degree. Most interviewees had completed the VPL process successfully. Only two interviewees failed to have their qualification recognised in Germany.

It was not possible to conduct interviews with a biographical perspective in Turkey. Instead, questionnaires were used to interview 69 employees who had undergone the VPL process. These questionnaires also provided some insight into the VPL process from the beneficiaries' point of view. To reach the target sample, we first contacted all authorised certification bodies (ACB) in Turkey via e-mail or telephone, requesting their cooperation in finding companies that recruit people with a Vocational Qualification Certificate (VQC), a form of VPL. However, only one of the nearly hundred ACBs agreed to cooperate. This certification body gave us a list of companies that employ certified workers. We then contacted these companies to ask if we could approach their employees holding a VQC to collect data. Only one company agreed to help. However, a biographical approach meant it was not possible to collect data in an interview as managers were unwilling to release their employees from their duties, even for a short time. Therefore, the data was collected in a more structured way using a questionnaire form. Altogether, 69 employees who had been through the VPL process completed the questionnaire. Whenever possible, open-ended questions were also asked, but only a few responded to them.

For this reason, we decided to combine the two sources: the interviews and the questionnaires. We prepared four summary documents, one for each country, describing collected answers and/or the course of conducted interviews. Since the Turkish part was based on a different research tool, we decided to analyse it separately and compare it with the other three countries. The summaries of the interviews from Germany, Poland and Denmark were evaluated by means of a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000, 2010). We used lexical searches and coding to examine all interviews and cross-checked the coding. In both phases we used the MAXQDA2020 software to ensure the objectivity of our findings (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019), for which qualitative coding with an inductive-deductive approach was employed. We developed four codes to recognise the effects of VPL on individuals and compare the effects between the countries surveyed: (1) education, (2) professional/work, (3) improvement and (4) VPL process. In the three documents (one for each country studied), 323 fragments were coded in total. We encoded 134 fragments for education, 108 for professional/work, 17 for improvement and 64 for VPL process.

In the first code, we included all content relating to formal education, new paths for further education, extramural examinations and certification related to vocational education and training (VET). The second code, 'professional/work' was used for content involving changed work opportunities, the engagement of labour market institutions, and professional change. Both were the indicators of the VPL effect, as previously defined. We also decided to add a separate code for individual benefits – 'improvement' – as interviewees referred to particular benefits. Finally, we also developed a separate code for the content related to the VPL process. Since the study con-

centrates on the individual effects of VPL, we also studied individuals' perception of the process, or the 'cost' of gaining the benefits. Hence, we look at both the description of VPL processes in the interviews and interviewees' assessment of those elements. Before outlining the findings of the interviews, we will briefly describe the VPL systems of the four countries.

Validation of prior learning – a variety of understandings

Germany

In Germany, currently, VPL presents a picture of rather uncoordinated regulations, programmes, processes and projects, all headed by different authorities and with varying outreach. Only limited regulations or guidelines exist to establish flexible and transparent validation processes. Among other reasons, this is due to the highly regulated education system that focuses on formal qualifications and the close link between school-based and work-based learning in the framework of the formalised, nationally regulated dual system of vocational education and training (Greinert, 2007). While informal and practice-based learning at the workplace is considered important, it is not taken into account in the context of validation, mainly because it takes place outside the formal system. Below, we outline two validation approaches that are currently practised in Germany and have a legal basis.

First, the recognition of prior learning to be admitted to an external examination that forms part of the formal education system. For vocational training, this procedure was established in the 1960s to give those not formally trained in the dual apprenticeship programme the chance to acquire a formal vocational qualification. According to the Vocational Training Act (Section 45 (2)) and regulations set up by the Chamber of Crafts (Section 37 (2)), people may apply to sit the final examination without having attended the respective vocational training programme (i. e. as external candidates) if they meet certain requirements, including proof of relevant work experience of at least one and a half times the duration of the regular training programme. A further option is proving that relevant competences have been acquired in other ways.

Second, the recognition of equivalence of prior learning to national education standards and certificates, the Vocational Qualifications Assessment Law (BQFG) was introduced in April 2012. It guarantees individuals the right to have foreign qualifications recognised by a competent authority as equal to a respective national qualification within three months. Although the law focuses on assessing and comparing formal qualifications, informally acquired competences and relevant work experience may be considered when formal certificates are missing or incomplete (BQFG section 3 paragraph 1). The recognition process is based in the first place on assessing relevant documents such as training certificates, certificates of capability and proof of relevant domain-specific work experience acquired in a foreign country or in Germany (BQFG section 3 paragraph 1). Complementary competence assessment is also possible, based on practical tests, proof of work and interviews. Should significant skill gaps

impede full recognition, partial recognition can be awarded and may be supplemented by further training, for example (Böse et al., 2014).

Poland

VPL-like processes in Poland have been in place for some time, particularly in the context of vocational qualifications and crafts. For these domains, VPL was regulated by law in 1989. Since 2010, VPL has been introduced more systematically; the system was fundamentally overhauled in 2012 by establishing the possibility of taking an extramural vocational examination (without attending formal vocational education).

Overall, several legislative changes gradually led to the restructuring of the system, with most taking place between 2012 and 2017 (Duda, 2016). The aim was to build a consistent VPL system in Poland with coherent, nationally defined procedures that recognise the competences acquired by individuals in different learning settings and through different forms of learning. The approach seeks to recognise these forms as equivalent to formal education.

State-regulated VPL for the time being includes (i) the extramural vocational examinations conducted by Regional Examination Commissions (OKE); (ii) Chambers of Crafts examinations; and (iii) special professional qualifications (e. g. in the field of civil engineering). The methods used for validation are theoretical and practical examinations. In addition, based on the Integrated Qualification Systems Act of 22 December 2015, some pilot initiatives introduce new ways of validation, placing the individual and learning outcomes at the centre of attention rather than the educational system.

Apart from the extramural VET exams, two other VPL processes are available in Poland, both still on the basis of temporary, regional initiatives. The first is a pilot programme that was carried out in Małopolska as part of a project entitled “Development of a national qualification system – pilot implementation of the national qualification system and the information campaign on its operations carried out in cooperation with IBE (Institute for Educational Research)/WUP (Regional Labour Office) in Kraków 2014–2015”. In this project a group of participants had the opportunity to conduct a validation in one of five qualifications². The VPL process was conducted with methods such as the balance of competences method; a conversation/interview; a portfolio; an evidence analysis; a self-assessment questionnaire; an examination (this can be a knowledge test and a practical test); on-site observation or a simulation with work samples.

The second approach is the ongoing project Kierunek Kariera (Career direction), which offers participants a skills audit (*bilans kariery*). Here, participants are guided by professional career advisers as they compile a portfolio and establish potential professional and educational pathways. After finishing the skills audit, participants receive educational vouchers that allow them to start realising the next educational steps, as planned during the skills audit.

2 These qualifications comprised CNC operator, management coach, property management, pâtissier and management of small teams.

Denmark

VPL has been on the agenda in Denmark for about 20 years, and a legal framework has been in place since 2007. The Danish approach to VPL is decentralised, based on common principles. As such, the authority to provide a complete VPL process, including assessment and recognition, lies with the formal educational institutions. Every educational institution is obliged to provide validation towards goals and criteria for the corresponding study programme.

Due to the legal framework for VPL, there are three possible aims and outcomes of a VPL process:

1. to enable access to formal education, when ordinary preconditions are not met by the applicant
2. to tailor an individual study programme or award credits for certain classes, within the National Qualification Framework (NQF) up to but not including the master's degree level (NQF Level 7), and
3. to award a Competence Certificate if the participant meets the requirements for a partial qualification of an education programme. Awarding a full qualification is possible, yet rarely attained by applicants.

Furthermore, the Danish validation system includes a 'pre-phase' (information, identification and guidance). Candidates pay a fixed amount for the VPL process, based on a taximeter principle, for an institution to provide VPL. For applicants who have achieved education Level 4 or lower (NQF), there is no charge for the VPL process.

Although the Danish Ministry of Education recommends that the process include identification/mapping and documentation, institutions are not obliged to assist applicants in developing their documentation portfolios. The legal framework states that preparing the documentation of prior learning is the responsibility of the applicant.

In reality, compiling these portfolios appears to be quite complicated and time-consuming for applicants. Hence, other bodies such as trade unions, employers' associations or Public Employment Service Centres offer counselling for these pre-phases.

The application for VPL to access higher education and vocational and diploma programmes (at NQF Levels 5 and 6) enables candidates to have their prior learning recognised.

The 2015 reform on vocational education and training courses (VET) – with a special track for adults aged 25 and over – includes compulsory VPL prior to VET. The intention is to shorten the length of time required to complete education. VPL recognises documented and assessed prior learning competencies, based on the relevant work experience and formal education. Thereafter, as a post-validation result, an individual curriculum is prepared to enable each applicant to obtain their respective qualification.

According to the Danish model for the development and monitoring of education and training across the entire educational system, strong stakeholder collaboration secures the legitimacy of and trust in VPL results. Sector organisations develop the

criteria and standards for VPL and assessment according to the specific study programmes.

Turkey

In Turkey, validation of prior learning (VPL) was put into practice quite recently. The VPL process in Turkey is mainly implemented by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) and the Vocational Qualifications Authority (VQA). The General Directorate of Lifelong Learning also contributes to the development of the VPL system in Turkey by carrying out several projects. Other institutions involved in validation activities include the Higher Education Council, and the Turkish Employment Agency.

Since VPL practices are mainly implemented by the MoNE and VQA in Turkey, their procedures will be outlined below.

In the first approach, vocational training centres affiliated to the MoNE General Directorate of Vocational and Technical Education implement the validation process in accordance with Vocational Education Law No 3308. Established in 1979, vocational training centres are public institutions where apprenticeship training is mainly carried out in Turkey. On the whole, apprenticeships target at least secondary school graduates who want to acquire a profession mainly through working at enterprises. In this system, apprentices attend a training centre once a week; the other six days, they work in a workplace where a mentor known as the 'master trainer' is responsible for monitoring their work-based development. Apprentices become journeymen on completing their training and passing their examinations. On completion of further training and passing the examination, a journeyman is ultimately awarded a master certificate by these institutions (Ünlühisarcıklı & Vos, 2013). However, under recent regulations, those who have not taken part in the apprenticeship training system in these centres but have practised a profession being employed in the past and have the relevant social security insurance papers and other required documents can apply to a vocational training centre for validation of their prior learning. After applying, individuals sit the journeyman and master exams; if they are successful, they can get a certificate. These procedures are carried out in accordance with the Directive Regarding the Procedures and Principles Regarding the Recognition of Prior Learning, Equivalence and Measurement and Evaluation Procedures put into effect by the Ministry of National Education in 2017.

In the second approach, VPL practice in Turkey is implemented mainly by the VQA through authorised certification bodies (ACBs), which provide Vocational Qualifications Certificate (VQC). In 2015, an official statement entitled Occupations Requiring Vocational Qualifications Certificate was published in the Official Gazette (25 May, No. 29366). The purpose of this official statement was to identify occupations that require VQC for employees. This requirement is especially for extremely dangerous jobs such as steel welding, natural gas infrastructure construction control and industrial pipe installations (Akkök, 2016). Therefore, the VQC has become compulsory in specific occupations mentioned in the official statement.

Individual perspective on validation – differences between European countries

The analysis of the individual perspective shows that the differences on the national levels are also visible on the level of single applicants. The comparison of the country reports from Germany, Poland and Denmark shows that the main emphasis of each system influences perception of the process, as well as chances for further education and/or better employment opportunities. We examined the interview reports in terms of lexical content to compare the dominant aspects in the interviewees' perception of their VPL process. Turkey was excluded from the lexical analysis due to the different tools and methods used for gathering data. The analysis for Turkey is included in the further steps of the study.

An analysis of the frequency of the terms used in the interviews shows that the words used most often were *work* (183 occurrences), *education* (105 occurrences) and *qualification* (89 occurrences). The word cloud in Figure 1 shows that the initial dimensions for effective VPL processes are well adjusted to the actual individual perception of VPL. Even an initial analysis of the lexical content shows the differences between the countries in the study. In Denmark, the most frequent words were closely related to the formal educational system: *education* (40 occurrences), *competence* (23 occurrences) and *assessment* (21 occurrences) (Figure 4).



Figure 1: Word cloud – most frequently appearing words in all examined interviews

At the same time, the word cloud for Germany shows a stronger relation to work, the non-formal education and recognition process, and the labour market (Figure 2). The most frequent words are *work* (89 occurrences), *train* (39 occurrences) and *process* (32 occurrences). In Poland, the content of the interviews combines these two orientations and is related to formal education and work, as the most frequent words are *work* (92 occurrences), *qualifications* (64 occurrences) and *school* (61 occurrences) (Figure 3). In Turkey, since VPL is carried out by authorised certification bodies through a straightforward application, examination and certification process, and because it is a necessity, those who benefit from the process regard it as a formality. The observations on the lexical level are equal to the conclusions based on the coding differences between the analysed countries, presented below (Figure 5).

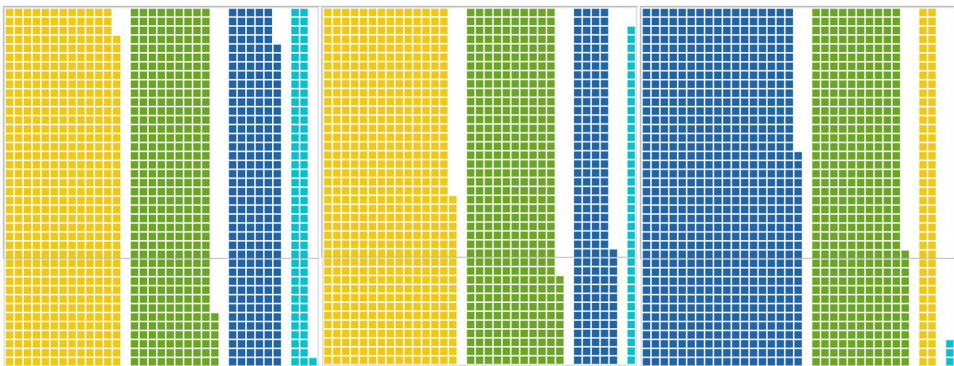


Figure 5: Coding differences: Germany, Poland and Denmark

Colour coding: professional/work – yellow, education – green, VPL process – dark blue, improvement – light blue.

Thus, depending on the country and operating VPL system, individual perception of the effects of the validation varies. In all countries, approximately the same percentage of coded content relates to education (green). The difference is clear in the other areas. In Germany and Poland, the most important (or frequent) aspects relate to the profession and work/labour market (yellow), while in Denmark the process itself was the most frequently discussed issue (dark blue). In the next sections, we will look at each of those areas in greater detail. The analysis presented below combines interviews and questionnaire responses (including Turkey).

Perception of the VPL process

In Poland and Germany, interviewees continually indicated the importance of guidance throughout the process. This was a key issue for the perception and assessment of the process; if the guidance was managed well, the subjective feeling about the VPL process tended to be positive. By contrast, the lack of proper guidance caused frustration and made the process both longer and harder:

“She [the counsellor] said ‘You are studying, why do you need to?’ I said ‘Yes, but I want to do it’”. (Germany)

In Denmark, the interviewees referred to the process itself most frequently, calling it complex, but very transparent. In the description of the process itself, strong links to the educational system are visible:

“Then another interview is carried out, in which the consultant gains a clear picture of which subjects need to be assessed. The individual competence assessment is continued with a teacher of the relevant subjects. Several materials and methods are used in the assessment”. (Denmark)

In Turkey, the process was viewed rather as a formality and closely linked to the labour market: most beneficiaries went through the VPL process because it is a formal requirement for employers to employ workers with a certification:

“I got the certificate and left it at home. I did not learn anything new about my job during the certification process; I learned everything from my master trainers. Do you think employers would allow me to use a 650,000 TL machine just because I have a certificate? That’s ridiculous! I got the certificate only to please my employer”. (Turkey)

New educational opportunities

Poland and Germany show many similarities in reference to the links between VPL processes and the educational systems, also in terms of self-preparation for extramural examinations after some time or going back to study on a higher level. In Germany, higher education aspirations were mostly found among migrant workers:

My dream was to study. I had to give it up back then in Poland. Then I came here and then there were questions regarding the financing and admission, nothing was recognised. I couldn’t do anything with that, so I didn’t bother”. (Germany)

In Poland, although it often leads to further education, the VPL process is not directly connected to the education system. As one of the interviewees said, “The more I learned, the more I learned that I do not know”. (Poland)

The VPL system is closely linked to the educational system in Denmark, reflecting the perception of the process by individuals. This influence is visible both in the number of mentions of education-related issues in the interviews as well as in what the interviewees say about the results of the VPL process:

“During the session, I was informed of my options and offered a course to help clarify my position. (...) By this means, I was given a personalised job and education plan via an adult vocational training module”. (Denmark)

The perception of educational input was rather different in Turkey. Certification, as respondents referred to the VPL process, was extremely important on the labour market, instead of being an opportunity to learn:

“(…) obtaining the certificate does not mean you are a master. The experience I gained while doing my job is more effective for me than the certificate I got”. (Turkey)

Employability potential

The VPL system in Germany is closely linked to the labour market. Thus, the interviewees mostly cited job opportunities, explaining how the VPL process enhanced their employability or increased their chances for promotion. The validation process opened new doors, as in the case of one interviewee, who was promoted to coordinator in a household services business, doubling her income, after her validation. She describes the promotion as a challenge:

“Coordinating also includes dealing with clients, like the customer admission, customer calls and communication. This was uncharted territory for me. […] I slipped into nothing, [I had no support] and had first to learn how to deal with customers”. (Germany)

In Poland, on the other hand, the impact of the VPL process on job opportunities is not overly significant and mostly relates to increased self-esteem after the process. Many interviewees admitted that, following validation, they were no longer afraid to change their workplace or find new employment for themselves. Employability potential is rarely mentioned in the Danish interviews. The VPL process certainly helped tap the potential in the current workplace, especially when the employer helped with initiating and going through the process.

Overall, 72.5 % of the participants in Turkey viewed the VQC as a positive contribution to their job opportunities because the certification proves they have the required qualifications, should they not have any other evidence or relevant training to prove their competence.

“I believe that obtaining the certificate increased my chances of getting a job. While certification increases confidence, it has no effect on increasing knowledge”. (Turkey)

Feeling of improvement

Given the individual perspective on the effectiveness of the VPL processes, this category may well be the most important. Despite its direct impact on study participants' career or education level, the VPL was viewed as a positive experience by most.

In Germany, Poland and Denmark, the analysis shows that virtually all processes had a favourable outcome: promotion or new job opportunities, opening the door to further education or investment in a brand new path, such as self-employment. These effects are mostly related to both the certification and the guidance, which increase the self-esteem and confidence level of VPL process beneficiaries considerably.

The Turkish experiences show that VPL is a formality and tends to be viewed as such. On the other hand, in open-ended questions, the Turkish employees stated that, although the VQC increased their job opportunities and consequently their self-confidence, their previous work experience had a more significant impact on their skills than the VPL process. The following reflection of an employee exemplifies this situation.

“Being certified increased my confidence. It is not convincing to just talk about yourself during the recruiting process; employers want to see proof. So having a certificate makes the process easier”. (Turkey)

Another employee also reflected on how it contributed to his self-confidence:

“Being certified boosted my confidence. I am now much more comfortable doing my job than before”.

Conclusions and discussion

All policies presented in the paper were influenced by the European regulations. These regulations introduced a common understanding of VPL processes. Nonetheless, the mode of implementation, the main aim of VPL policies and the perception of the VPL process vary a great deal among the countries described. The four countries are very different in terms of their national policies and their predominant ideas about VPL. The national systems are either based on the labour market (Turkey), the education system (Denmark) or designed to combine the two (Germany, Poland). These variations in the system are easily visible on both analysis levels: the policy and the individual level.

Differences in the individual perspective occurred at all levels of the analysis: education and work opportunities, the perception of the process and subjective feelings of progress. In Turkey, for most individuals the process was a formality, whilst in Denmark it was chiefly an opportunity to return to formal education with their skills and expertise acknowledged. In Germany and Poland, the validation process was a chance for enhanced recognition on the labour market and sometimes a way into further education.

At the same time, some similarities were noted. Interviewees and questionnaire respondents admitted that the process had significantly influenced their self-esteem and confidence level. Even if there were no other objective improvements in their lives, this was an important and positive effect of VPL for the majority. The formality or bureaucracy was mentioned by individuals, despite the differences between countries. This factor was regarded as a negative aspect of VPL processes, with the majority of participants of this study finding them complicated, time-consuming and lengthy.

There are significant contrasts between the main aims of VPL processes in the four countries and the implementation of the EU recommendations (European Council, 2012) on the national level. These differences are not only visible when comparing the policies, but also on the individual perception level. The beneficiaries of the VPL process in different countries perceive the process and the effect it has (or had) on their lives in contrasting ways. The main conclusion from the study is that the individual effects of VPL processes are closely related to the systemic solutions in the given country and therefore depend on the respective national policy. This implies that fur-

ther research is required with regard to the historical and cultural aspects that influence the introduction of VPL in different European countries.

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