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1. Objectives of this paper

The objectives of this paper are:

- To position the voluntary sector as an important environment for non-formal learning;
- To contribute to coherence and synchronisation when it comes to validation projects and activities in the voluntary sector;
- To support and encourage new initiatives in this field.

2. Introduction

Since the publication of the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, many projects have been run on validation in the voluntary sector, taking the risk of “reinventing the wheel”, for instance, by spending resources on creating new tools and methodologies which could have been inspired by existing ones or by conducting research on similar topics. For instance, the [Job bridge project](#) also covers validation in the voluntary sector, except it has a specific focus on skills developed in volunteering that are useful for the labour market. It started the same year as [ImproVal](#), some activities, the launch of European surveys on validation tools for instance were similar, while other activities were completely different. In this case, one of the ImproVal partner also partner in Job Bridge could make sure the two projects run different but complementary activities, mutually beneficial but this might not be possible with other EU projects.

Since 2012, stakeholders had the opportunity to meet, network and exchange at several occasions, hence contributing to the building of a community of practitioners at EU level. We can mention the Validation for Prior Learning (VPL) Biennale in Aarhus (May 2017) and Berlin (May 2019), the European Validation Festival (Brussels, June 2018), the “Peer Learning Activity on Validation of Soft and Transversal Skills acquired through Non-Formal and Informal learning by adults when volunteering” (Brussels, January 2019), and the Cedefop conference “How to make learning visible” (Thessaloniki, December 2016), and the “Position paper: Validation in the voluntary

sector - past, present, and future; a contribution to the evaluation of the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning” from EDOS Foundation. The Lifelong Learning Platform’s and external partners’ survey on the creation of a VNFIL community in Europe seem to show there is huge appetite for such a community. This call ImproVal partners for contributing to the community.

This paper is based on the experiences and outcomes of all these projects and meetings, as well as on the two initial activities of the ImproVal project: The Compendium on validation tool and the study on the impact of those tools. The already mentioned “Position paper: Validation in the voluntary sector” was the basis. People and organisations in the international network of EDOS Foundation contributed to this position paper, and it was presented at the Volunteering Congress of the European Volunteer Centre, November 2019. As next step, the paper was presented to and discussed with the partners of the ImproVal project. Based on these discussions, the “position paper” was adapted to “policy paper” as intended in the ImproVal application.

3. Background information on validation in the voluntary sector

Validation is, first, about making visible the diverse and rich learning of individuals. This learning frequently takes place outside formal education and training - at home, in the workplace or through leisure time-activities - and is frequently overlooked and ignored. Validation is, second, about attributing value to the learning of individuals, irrespective of the context in which this learning took place. Going through validation helps a learner to ‘exchange’ the outcomes non-formal and informal learning for future learning or employment opportunities (source: European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning, 2015).

“In 20 Member States there are validation arrangements made available in the third sector. This includes initiatives associated with youth work or volunteering, as well as validation opportunities developed by charities or other non-governmental organisations (NGOs)” (source: European Commission, SWD(2020) 121 final)

The recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning is highly relevant in the European educational area. This is widely acknowledged on EU level, as written in these policy documents:

- “The role of voluntary activities in social policy”, Council of the European Union (October 2011)
- “Volunteering: passport to a job?”, Committee on culture and education of the European Parliament (June 2012)
- “Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning” (December 2012)
- “Towards a European area of skills and qualifications”, European Commission (June 2014).
- “Validation of skills and qualifications acquired through non-formal and informal learning”, European Economic and Social Committee (September 2015).
- “The European Inventory on VNFIL”, Cedefop (2018)
- “Evaluation of the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning” accompanying the Communication on the “European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience”, European Commission, Staff working document (July 2020)

Mechanisms to validate non-formal and informal learning contribute to tackle unemployment, and to achieve a better matching between jobs and skills by acknowledging those acquired outside the formal education system.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning also gives opportunities for second chances, improves access to education, and enhances motivation to learn. It contributes to social inclusion, personal development, empowerment, and employability.

The role of volunteering:

‘Volunteering is widely acknowledged as an outstanding source of learning, and an important contributor to personal and professional development. Volunteering is an element of social innovation that can mobilise people’s creativity to develop solutions and make better use of scarce resources.

At the societal level, it can be a tool for the empowerment of people, especially for disadvantaged groups in society. At the individual level, volunteering can be a means for citizens to acquire important soft and transversal skills, to play a useful role, and to connect or reconnect with society.

Volunteering is understood to be a driving force behind social cohesion and personal development, and the EMPL formation of the European Council Conclusions encouraged the ‘promotion of the role of volunteering as a form of non-formal and informal learning contributing to obtaining new skills and competences and improved employability in each and every age and social group.’

(Source: Background paper of the European Commission, in cooperation with the European Volunteer Centre and the Lifelong Learning Platform, for the Peer Learning Activity on Validation of Soft and Transversal Skills acquired through Non-Formal and Informal learning by adults when volunteering, Brussels, January 2019).

4. What has been done so far

Since the publication of the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, there have been many projects dealing with validation in the voluntary sector: around 20 projects have dealt in one way or another with the validation of skills/competences of volunteers: [Easy - Evaluate Soft](#)

[skills in International Youth volunteering](#) (2017-2018) - [Euravon](#) (2014-2016) - [Volcar](#) (2015-2017) - [VaPoVo](#) (2014-2016) - [e-VOC](#) (2016-2018) - [ValidVOL](#) (2014-2016) - [Lever](#) (2014-2016) - [Lever Up](#) (2017-2019) - [GR-EAT](#) (2014-2016) - [CivCil](#) (2015-2017) - [Volunteering Validation Highway](#) (2013) - [RIVER](#) (2012) - [Destination E-validation](#) (2014-2016) - [Innoval](#) (2016-2018) - [I've Experienced](#) (2014-2016) - [Valley](#) (2015-2017) - [Voyce](#) (2016-2018) - [Job Bridge](#) (2018-2020) - [ImproVal](#) (2018-2020) - [UpVal](#) (2019-2021). The outcomes of these projects can usually be accessed in the [Erasmus+ dissemination platform](#).

More than 50 organizations in 20 EU member states were involved in these projects. Thus, more and more people and organizations are becoming aware of the educational value of volunteering, and of (the benefits of) validation opportunities in the voluntary sector.

More than 40 validation tools for the voluntary sector have been developed and tested in EU member states. An overview and analysis of these tools can be found on www.improval.eu

Obviously, for several reasons (search algorithms, language barriers of partners, limited information available online, etc.), it was not possible to collect all tools used in the voluntary sector. But they can be added [here](#).

So, we can say that the voluntary sector is very active in the field of validation, and very motivated to contribute to new developments.

5. What is missing?

It seems that, so far, the structural use of validation tools and methods in the voluntary sector is still limited and highly fragmented. Apparently, something more is necessary to make validation an integrated part of volunteering.

Also, hardly any bridges between projects have been created, which includes the risk of reinventing the wheel on one side, and “missing links” on the other side, e.g. in connecting the validation tools and methods with the European Guidelines for

Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning, or instruments like the European Qualifications Framework.

According to Cedefop “European Inventory on Validation 2018”, presented at the VPL Biennale in Berlin (May 2019), the so-called “third sector”, which includes the voluntary sector, is far behind “education and training” and the “labour market” when it comes to offering outcomes of validation arrangements (award of a qualification, exemptions, access to formal education, training specifications).

6. Perspectives on the future

6.a Creating bridges between projects

We think that it makes sense to create cooperation / connection / exchange between projects dealing with validation in the voluntary sector. They can support each other, benefit from each other, and learn from each other, and in this way strengthen each other by

- inviting each other for participation in project conferences or other activities
- sharing intellectual outputs and research findings
- making use of each other’s dissemination and publication channels
- developing ideas for dissemination and impact

Here we see a role for Erasmus+ National Agencies, as far as it concerns projects in the framework of the Erasmus+ program. Also, platforms at European level, such as the European Volunteer Centre, Volonteuropa and the Lifelong Learning Platform, could play a role in connecting projects with each other. European-wide events like the Validation Festival are also key opportunities for validation stakeholders to meet, network and exchange.

6.b Making use of the existing infrastructures in the voluntary sector

In many EU Member States there are platforms at national level, for example the Italian Association of Volunteer Support Centres, the Platform of Volunteer Centres and Organizations in Slovakia, and the National Alliance for Volunteer Action Bulgaria. These platforms can play an important role in introducing, implementing, and strengthening validation in the voluntary sector. At the same time, organisations from Member States where such a platform does not exist can be invited to join projects, in this way encouraging them to initiate such a platform. More strategic use of programs like Erasmus+ could support this.

6.c Build the capacity of volunteering organisations and managers

Volunteer managers or facilitators play an important role on all levels in the voluntary sector. Their awareness of the value of validation for the volunteers as well as for the organisation can contribute to strengthening the attention on this. Several training courses for volunteer managers have been developed and tested:

- [Volcar](#) training programme
- [VaPoVo](#) training manual
- [E-VOC](#) training course

6.d Raise awareness of volunteers through guidance and communication strategies on VNFIL

Guidance and information wrapped around or integrated within VNFIL processes is emerging as a strategic focus both across the EU and nationally, requiring greater prominence for citizens as our career and life pathways need continuous support and management. Setting up communications strategies on VNFIL and raising awareness for opportunities, services and possible outcomes is a challenge that needs to be addressed along with managing expectations and understanding associated with and from validation processes.

Volunteers need to understand how learning that has been validated can realistically be applied in terms of applications for relevant access, credits, exemptions in diverse academic contexts, and or to aim strategically where academic progress may be part of career planning. Equally, the skills of volunteers may align to aspects of business-related skills that are also very highly prized; building the bridge to recognition for the individual volunteer may not be the role of the volunteer manager but may be also facilitated within career guidance and information services. It is imperative that volunteering services have a capacity to document roles and contributions as a prelude to easing recognition. However, besides formal education or labour market outcomes, it can be cautioned that volunteers' learning can be very valuable in itself, and may be validated without necessarily conferring on it eligibility for academic or employment purposes, but, simply for volunteers' personal development. Stakeholders, and that also includes stakeholders outside the volunteering scope (e.g. public employment services), need to be informed about the relevance and usefulness of VNFIL for volunteers.

6.e Foster cross-sector cooperation in the design and implementation of VNFIL in the voluntary sector

“Stakeholders’ cooperation is not enough. There is a need for strategic coordination. While a variety of agencies providing validation can be a richness, responding to the needs of a diverse set of beneficiaries, a closer coordination of providers and cooperation with all stakeholders could improve both effectiveness - through better visibility, wider reach out, operational synergies - and efficiency, by distributing burdens, sharing facilities and peer learning.”
(source: EC Evaluation of the 2012 Council Recommendation on VNFIL, SWD 2020)

According to the EC Evaluation of the 2012 Council Recommendation on VNFIL (SWD 2020), in 2018, 18 Member States explicitly report that validation arrangements are developed and implemented through multi-stakeholder cooperation. While this is encouraging, a lot more can be achieved to support a culture and practice of

cooperation within Member States between the public sector (public employment services, public education and training institutions), the business sector (including social partners) as well as the third sector, and volunteering organisations, in particular. The research completed in the Job Bridge project highlighted the need and the relevance for stakeholders to engage in such cooperation (The European State-of-play of validation in the voluntary sector (December 2019). This brings many benefits, such as to build comprehensive VNFIL policies that individuals are aware of and can easily access, to build stakeholders' trust in the outcomes of validation (e.g. employers) or for improving the outreach and efficiency of guidance provisions. It is also evident and proven that “the main factors influencing the efficiency of validation [are] multi-stakeholder cooperation and effective targeting” (European Commission, SWD(2020) 121 final).

6.f Creating stronger connections between developments at EU and national level and the voluntary sector

A) European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning

The projects and validation tools mentioned in the section 4 of this policy paper chapter 6 show that not all initiatives in the voluntary sector are based on these [Guidelines](#), which can make the outcomes weaker, and harder to connect with national validation arrangements.

⇒ **Organisations in the voluntary sector should be more aware of these Guidelines.**

B) Make validation part of the European Education Area

The European Commission is going to release a Communication about Achieving the European Education Area in the autumn, which will outline the follow-up of the Education and Training 2020 framework.

⇒ **VNFIL in the voluntary sector or in the third sector in general constitute an important mechanism to help achieving it.**

C) National validation strategies

All EU Member States were supposed to have a validation strategy by 2018, or at least to have started working on it. According to Cedefop "[European Inventory on Validation 2018](#)", a validation strategy is in place in 21 Member States, while under development in 15 member states. In the Council Conclusions on reskilling and upskilling as a basis for increasing sustainability and employability (8 June 2020), there is a recommendation to Member States to "to take further action (...) on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, in particular by making validation arrangements more comprehensive and accessible"

- ⇒ **Connecting validation initiatives in the voluntary sector with the national validation system can play a role in strengthening the external value of volunteering, and in creating connections with formal education and the labour market.**

D) New Europass platform

A new Europass Platform will be introduced in all Member States in 2020. In some Member States (The Netherlands, Belgium-Flanders, and Czech Republic), the "Europass certificate for volunteers" has already been introduced during the last years. A similar document, aiming at the validation of non-formal and informal learning, will be connected with this new Europass Platform. Making use of this document, can probably also strengthen the external value of validation in the voluntary sector.

- ⇒ **Cooperation between National Europass Centres and national volunteering platforms can be a first step in this process.**

E) European Qualification Framework

The alignment of the European Qualification Framework and the National Qualification Frameworks can help to create more transparency and visibility of qualifications.

- ⇒ **Looking at these frameworks when describing the skills, competences and qualifications of volunteers can create bridges between the voluntary sector and the labour market.**

F) New Erasmus+ program

The new Erasmus+ program will start in 2021. In publications announcing the new program we read:

“New or reinforced synergies could be established at several levels: at strategic level (enhanced coherence of policy objectives), at programming level (enhanced coherence of priorities and compatible implementation frameworks), and at project level (strategic pooling of funding from several sources).” (COM(2018) 367 final)

- ⇒ **Keeping in mind what is written above, it is certainly worth exploring which new opportunities this could create for the voluntary sector. Erasmus+ National Agencies could play a role in supporting national volunteering platforms in this process.**

6.g Recommendations from other sources

As already mentioned, there have been several meetings during the last years, where the future of validation has been discussed. Here we mention the conclusions or recommendations from these meetings which are, in our opinion, highly relevant in the framework of this paper.

Cedefop conference “How to make learning visible” (Thessaloniki, December 2016):

- *“validation needs to move from policy to implementation”*
- *“social partners and especially employers, need to be involved in the design and implementation of validation practices”*
- *“raising awareness of the importance and benefits of validation”*
- *“better understanding of the benefits of validation for the individual, will also facilitate the recruitment of disadvantaged groups into validation processes”*

The full summary of the conference and its outcomes is available on the [Cedefop Website](#).

“Peer learning activity on validation of soft and transversal skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning by adults when volunteering” (Brussels, January 2019):

- *“Further developments should be based on a bottom-up approach and maximum cross-sector collaboration in order that there is common ownership and ‘buy-in’ to the process and eventual results and outcomes.”*
- *“The possibilities offered by the new Europass for documenting soft, transversal skills acquired through volunteering that are validated should be maximised.”*
- *“Efforts to compile a directory of existing validation tools should be supported by all stakeholders especially and in particular the ongoing process within the project ImproVal.”*
- *“The Cedefop Guidelines on Validation should be updated in order to include the advanced knowledge of the topic in the field and the recent developments. They should provide the foundation for quality assurance processes for validation tools.”*

VPL Biennale (Berlin, May 2019)

The [“Berlin Declaration”](#), discussed and adapted at the VPL Biennale in May 2019, contains recommendations for the further development and implementation of validation arrangements. Related to the voluntary sector, these are, in our opinion, the most relevant ones:

- *“Relevant stakeholders should cooperate, so that VPL and its results hold value and are highly recognised in society. The value and importance of validation needs a widely and continuous attention of all stakeholders and potential users to get really implemented and acknowledged in society, work and education. This is a responsibility for all involved in VPL. The needed cooperation of course leads to an equal position of all sectors where non-formal and informal learning takes place.”*
- *“VPL should include guidance and support at every stage of the process. In our current projects we aim to define what kind of support is needed on individual and organisational level to stimulate the use of validation in the*

volunteering sector. More specifically, the support of organisations by local, regional or national support organisations, like volunteer centres or volunteer organisations, can be a valuable condition for further implementation and use of validation tools. This support structure should of course be part of an overall (national) system for VPL.”

- *“Validation pathways need to be modular, transparent, and comprehensible at all stages of the process, in order to allow for flexible work and education pathways. The learner should be at the centre of the VPL process. This implies that the way to validate of someone’s non-formal and informal learning outcomes can vary per learner. When the procedure adapts to the learner, the thresholds to start VPL will be easier to overcome. Easier access and the entrance to VPL will stimulate the use of VPL and thus further learning and working. This contributes also to lifelong learning as an important way to decrease unemployment and increase societal participation and inclusion.*