

VALIDATION IN VOLUNTEERING

A study on the outcomes and impact of the validation of volunteers' competences

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Introduction

Education and learning are substantial and constant parts of everyone's life. Even though the concept of learning is often associated with courses, assignments and exams (formal learning), knowledge, skills and competences can also be acquired in many other ways (informal/non-formal learning). Sometimes, we are not even aware of all the activities from which we educate ourselves and which competences we might have developed through them.

The recognition problem

Imagine a 23-year old volunteer from Germany. About 6 years ago, she joined the Red Cross Youth. Throughout her volunteering pathway, she has gained not only a lot of medical expertise but also important soft skills, such as how to assume responsibility. Since she has always had a keen interest in medical sciences, she aspires to become a doctor. Good grades are an essential requirement to study medicine at a German university. As she has never been a top student, her rather mediocre grades will very likely keep her from realising her dream – despite the skills she has already developed throughout her volunteering career.

On one side, this situation shows the indispensable and capital role that volunteering plays in lifelong learning. It allows volunteers to develop personal, social and civic skills that could have not been acquired through formal training. On the other side, it also underlines that informally gained competences are seldom recognised by formal education, companies or institutions (EUCIS-LLL 2015).

What is the reason for this lack of recognition? Firstly, volunteers often find it difficult to communicate what competences and skills they have acquired during their volunteering. Secondly, employers have difficulties to identify those skills and competences when reading through the credentials of volunteer organisations as these certificates often describe the activities done rather than the competences they have acquired. As a consequence, many job vacancies go unfilled as skills and competences are not visible (MATACHE 2015).

“Competence can be defined as the ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development.” (CEDEFOP 2014)

Even though more and more people and organisations all over Europe are becoming aware of the value of volunteering as well as of the benefits of VNFIL (validation of non-formal and informal learning) for the voluntary sector, their use and impact is still largely unknown. VNFIL arrangements are still not broadly developed all over Europe (MATACHE 2015). This runs the risk that those learning outcomes might be considered less valuable on the labour market than their potential suggests (BREMER & PEETERS 2017).

Validation (of learning): Validation is the process of identifying, evidencing, assessing and recognising skills and competences acquired in formal, non-formal and informal settings (CEDEFOP 2014)

The validation study within ImproVal

In order to address this issue, a project named *Improving Validation in the Voluntary Sector (ImproVal)* has been established. *ImproVal* is a European project, involving partners from five European countries (FI, NL, BE, DE, SK). The project aims to provide a synthesis of the work undertaken in the EU on the validation of volunteering experience.

Within the frame of the project a study was conducted to discover whether and how volunteers and voluntary organisations use validation tools to document skills and competences and if the participants have been able to use the outcomes of validation. To gain these insights, two questionnaires for volunteers as well as for organisations have been created and additional interviews with experts from the partner-countries were conducted. To avoid language barriers, both surveys were provided in 6 languages (English, German, Dutch, French, Finnish, Slovak). The interviews took place from November 2019 to January 2020.

The aim here was not to get as many answers as possible, but to get answers from people already using that tool. This resulted in an unequal number of participants from the countries the surveys were done in, since the usage of tools for assessing these competencies differs a lot when one is comparing different countries.

Methodology of surveys

Survey for organisations

The survey for organisations consisted of 30 questions in total – 3 single choice, 14 multiple choice and 5 open questions as well as 8 Likert scale questions. The total sample size of the organisation survey was 361, of which 44 surveys were completed. This results in a response rate of 12.19% with the answers mainly coming from the countries of the project-partners.

Survey for volunteers

The survey for volunteers consisted of 22 questions in total – 11 multiple choice and 3 open questions as well as 8 questions that the respondents were asked to answer using a Likert scale. The total sample size of the volunteer survey was 359, of which 25 surveys were completed. This results in a response rate of 6.96% with the answers mainly coming from the countries of the project-partners.

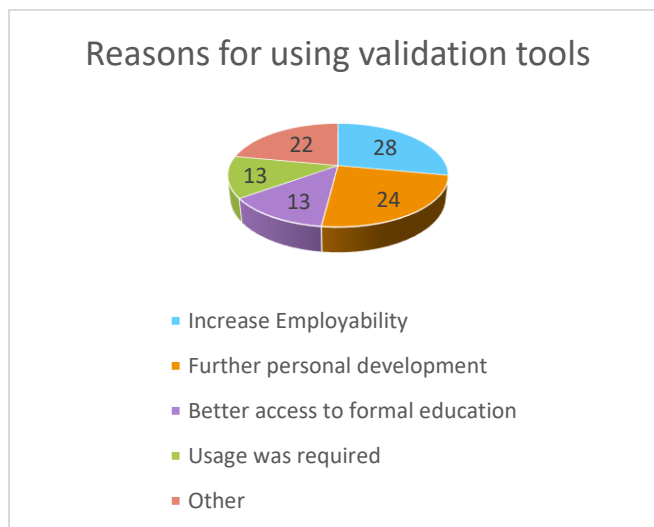
Semi-structured (peer) interviews

Apart from the online survey, 10 semi-structured (peer) interviews with experts from voluntary organizations from the partner-countries were conducted. Answers were recorded by note-taking and/or audio recording. After the interviews were conducted, each partner shared their most important findings with the entire project team. All of those findings were compared and combined in one interview summary afterwards.

Validation tools from the perspective of volunteers

Respondents were asked to select the tools they have been using. Since most of the answers from volunteers in this study came from participants in Slovakia, unsurprisingly the tools often being used there were mentioned more often over all. So a lot of the participants used either the *European multilingual tool Youthpass* or the Slovak tool *D-zrucnosti pre zamestnanie* (“V-Skills for Employment”). Most of the volunteers said that having used the tool would have been helpful in the employment system (42%). According to the volunteers, certificates (43%) and confirmations of participation (27%) are by far the most common means of “recognition” that describe and validate the competences they have acquired.

The main reasons that were named for starting to use the validation tool as described in graph 1 were:



In case that volunteers have gotten a permission, most of the respondents indicated that it helped them to find a better job (32%) or to get a better volunteering position (24%).

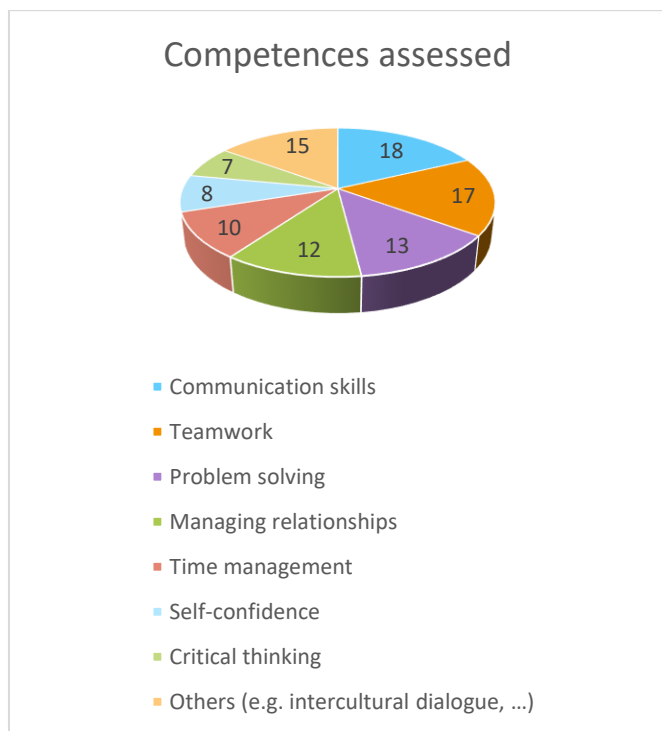
Validation tools from the perspective of organizations

When the organisations were asked to look at the tool from the volunteer perspective, most of them identified the difficulty to self-reflect on their competence development as the biggest challenge for volunteers in the evaluation process (30%). Other factors include a lack of interest (19%) or a lack of time (18%). Only 4% indicated their volunteers would not have had any difficulties while using the tool.

From the organisational perspective, time pressure (28%) and the struggle to identify the volunteers’ competences (18%), as well as a lack of evidence that could prove the volunteers’ competence development (14%) were frequently indicated. Furthermore, it was mentioned that it usually takes a long period of time until a new tool gets known and trusted in the society. Only 13% of the organisation respondents answered that they did not face any problems at all for implementing the tool.

Yet it was found that the reasons for using the tools, given by volunteers and organisations, show some discrepancy. While volunteers predominantly start using the tool in order to increase their employability, only very few of the organisations mentioned combating unemployment as a reason for implementing the tool. A popular reason for implementing a validation tool in their organisation was to reward the volunteers for their work, to formally validate their skills and make them aware of what they have achieved. The validation tool enables the volunteer to vocalise their experience and turn it into an asset, which can be used to facilitate their access into formal education or into the labour market. In some cases, the use of validation tools can also function as a “showpiece” for the organization, therefore, benefit the organisations’ reputation and even increase volunteer retention.

The competences that organisations assess by using validation tools are described in graph 2:



In order to recognise volunteers for the competences they have acquired, most organisations either issue certificates (37%) or a confirmation of participation (28%), which is in line with the kind of certification volunteers claim to receive (as mentioned above). Digital solutions such as Open Badges (8%) are still less common in some countries than in others. Over all it is to be expected that the interest in digital badges will continue to rise, especially among young people, during the next years.

In order to promote the validation process, it is essential to make volunteers aware of the benefits that come along with it. Using a validation tool should be seen a worthwhile investment rather than a time-consuming extra hassle. In general, the following aspects are considered as strengths/benefits of the validation process:

- + It helps recognizing (identifying, documenting, and assessing skills) skills acquired through voluntary work
- + Volunteers are more aware of what they have learned and how they have improved
- + Helpdesks and support are, when offered (e.g. *Europass*), useful, especially for elderly volunteers
- + Validation documentation and certificates can function as very useful addition to their application dossiers (in some cases the volunteer can directly download an official volunteer certification)
- + Overall, it supports the overall assumption that volunteering can lead to professional competence development

Yet the interviewees stated that certain steps within the validation process still offer room for improvement:

- Often, a very complex and time-consuming validation process
- Some tools are still not entirely digitized (“paper-intensive” processes can also be very time-consuming)
- There is a lack of standardization (reliable comparison between different tool outcomes cannot be ensured)
- Tools have a highly theoretical approach
- Some tool are offered on a platform but it is a closed space (only people from the volunteer organisation have access to the tool)
- There are a lack of “success stories” (young people finding a job after using the tool)
- The tool can induce management difficulties (esp. time/resource management)
- Regular promotion is mandatory as the tools do not seem to “self-develop”
- It can be proven difficult to connect the tool to other existing platforms (inter-operability, such as the organisation’s intranet)

One of the reasons that using the tool can be very complex and time-consuming, occurs when the volunteer has been involved in the organisation for a long period of time and has accompanied many projects where he or she might have developed competences. Apart from that, some tools are still not (entirely) digitized. Those “paper-intensive” processes increase the time investment. In the end, the success of a tool depends highly on its usability, as well as the efforts made by volunteering stakeholders in promoting them and making them accepted outside the volunteering context.

Recommendations for validation based on the surveys

So what about the 23-year old student who aspires to become a doctor? What should be done in order to help her further her educational or professional career?

1. Standardise the outcomes of validation tools

Policies need to be implemented that guarantee the credibility and reliability of the outcomes of the validation process. Possible approaches would be to standardise the structure of the obtained certificates or to adopt clear and transparent quality standards (FISHER 2019).

2. Promote validation tools

By creating the tools compendium, *ImproVal* has already made an important contribution to the promotion of validation tools. However, an even more intense and more frequent promotion of the tools will be necessary in the future.

3. Raise awareness and sensitization

“Validation cannot be considered as a good investment for individuals if it’s not widely understood and accepted by societies” (FISHER 2019). In order to make volunteers as well as other stakeholders in the education and employment sector

conscious about the potential that VNFIL yields, more awareness raising campaigns should be organised. This will help to reach out to potential tool users and organisations.

4. Make sure that validation tools reflect the volunteers' needs

As Bremer and Peeters (2017) have already stated: "The starting point of the validation process should be the individual needs and interests of the volunteer". Keeping that in mind while looking at the different tools, it shows that there is a relatively wide variety of designs.

Some tools are being used more often than others. It might be worth taking a closer look at how these tools operate and why they are popular.

Also, further potentials for improvement should be identified. This covers technical aspects, for instance. Especially among younger generations the use mobile devices and applications is very popular (STEFAŃSKA & WANAT 2017). Yet only a very small proportion of the respondents indicated that the tool that they are using offers a corresponding mobile application. Offering an app version of the tool could potentially increase its user-friendliness and thus attract new users.

5. Invest in trainings for tutors/mentors

As our research has shown, a broad spectrum of tools does already exist. While some European countries have no tools at all, others have 4 or even more tools. Problematic here is that after constructing the tools, most of them don't find enough attention in form of dissemination. This often results in the tools not being recognized, thus not being used and developed further and after a couple of years being cancelled altogether.

Instead of developing more and more tools, focus should be put on capacity building of educators. Guidance and counseling is essential throughout the entire process of validation – especially for the elderly tool users or those with a disadvantaged background.

6. Emphasise value of digital recognition methods

As mentioned above, traditional "tangible" recognition methods are still the most popular. New forms of recognitions such as Digital Badges, however, offer several advantages, especially in a higher education context. They can document informal learning outcomes in a more flexible way than traditional methods such as paper certificates (DEVEDZIC & JOVANOVIĆ 2015; DYJUR & LINDSTROM 2017). One of the interviewees mentioned that Open Badges are especially popular in Italy. It should therefore be considered as a starting point for further research in this field.

As can be seen, an increased effort and willingness to change recognition in education is still required in the future to improve and integrate the validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe. It is though hard to recommend one of the mentioned tools as the best one. This is on the one hand due to partly differing requirements from the perspective of organisations compared to volunteers and on the other hand due to the small sample size of the study that did not

include participants of every European country. Since that more research should be done in this field.

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