

Validation of non-formal and informal learning as a powerful tool for University Lifelong Learning in Europe¹

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The current context

Today's Europe is a Europe in the midst of change. Communications from the European Union regularly reference the green transition², the digital transition³, and perhaps even more importantly, the demographic transition⁴. The continent is facing significant labour shortages and skills gaps which are contributing to a loss of Europe's competitiveness in the global marketplace. From the onset of artificial intelligence (AI) to the climate crisis and conflicts around the world (including on our own continent), the concept of Europeans living in a VUCA⁵ world is becoming increasingly real.

In order to equip people with the knowledge and skills to respond to the challenges they are facing in their daily lives, the European higher education (HE) sector needs to adapt to the new reality and urgently respond to both current and future skills needs. Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNIL)⁶ is one important tool that can help address this challenge and support the reskilling and upskilling of the population on a wider level, while simultaneously enhancing Europe's culture of lifelong learning (LLL).

Defining VNIL

VNIL is a tool promoted and supported by the European Union and all its Member States⁷ to enable the recognition of all types of learning, not just formal learning. As CEDEFOP explains, "*validation is about making visible the diverse and rich*

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² https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en

³ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age_en

⁴ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/impact-demographic-change-europe_en

⁵ The concept of a VUCA world refers to the increasing levels of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity facing the world today.

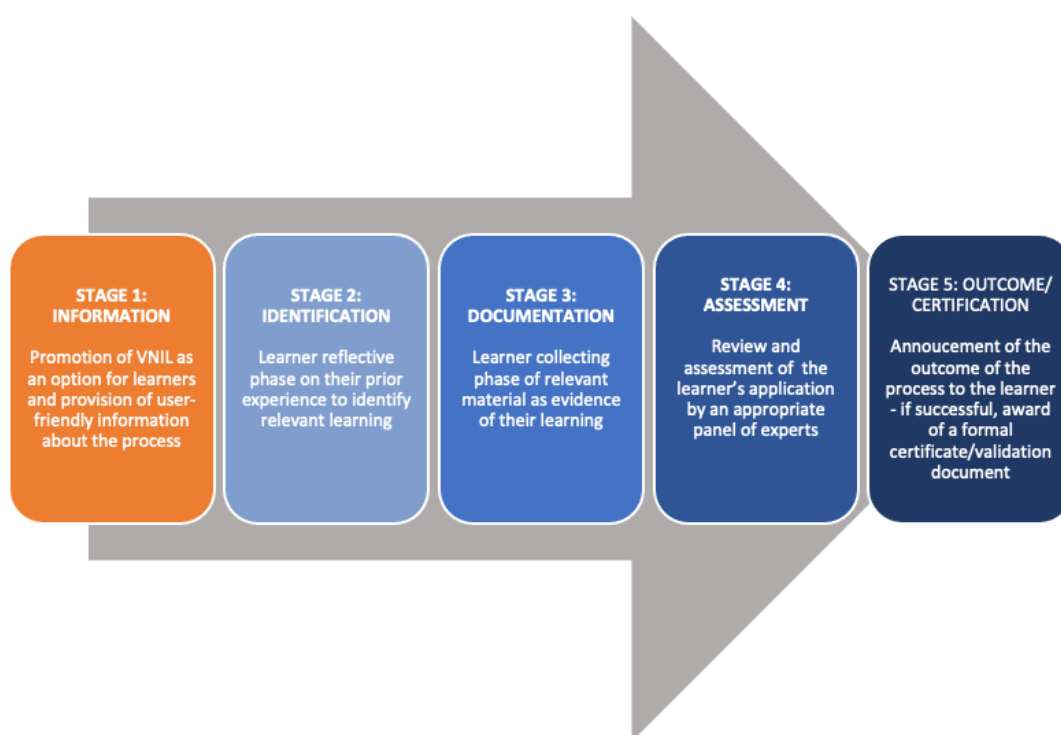
⁶ eucen has always used the acronym 'VNIL' to refer to the process of validation or recognition of prior learning, whether it is in formal, non-formal or informal formats. However, we are aware that different countries use different acronyms, for example: VPL, VFNIL, RPL or APL. When we write VNIL we are referring to any of these processes that "*confirm that the learning outcomes acquired by an individual in a formal, non-formal or informal setting have been assessed against a predefined criteria and are compliant with the requirements of a validation standard*" (Cedefop 2009, ISBN 978-92-896-0602-8).

⁷ Council Recommendation, 20 December 2012, 2012/C 398/01. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32012H1222%2801%29>

learning of individuals, irrespective of where this learning took place”⁸ and advocates that people learn both inside and outside classrooms, across a wide range of activities, and throughout their lives. VNIL thereby seeks to prove and validate the knowledge, skills and competences that an individual has developed in a particular field, regardless of where this knowledge developed and irrespective of the combination of formal, informal, and non-formal learning through which it was obtained. VNIL thus becomes a particularly powerful and impactful tool for recognising the expertise of individuals who have significant experience in the workplace, but who either lack formal qualifications or do not have physical proof of their qualifications or skills (e.g. in the case of migrants).

VNIL involves a number of actors (the candidate or learner and VNIL professionals such as counsellors, assessors, advisors, process managers and potentially other stakeholders including relevant academics and/or the board/panel responsible for making the final adjudication on VNIL applications) and comprises a transparent process in which an individual’s prior knowledge and skills are analysed and verified.

VNIL processes incorporate four different stages, as outlined in detail by Cedefop⁹: identification, documentation, assessment and certification. eucen has always added a fifth stage at the beginning of the process: information and outreach. *Diagram 1* below provides a detailed overview of this process.



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Diagram 1: The five stages of VNIL

⁸ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-toolkit-tackling-early-leaving/intervention-approaches/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning>

⁹ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/3093>

eucen's VNIL History

While VNIL appears to be gaining more traction of late, it is important to highlight that it is by no means a new concept – indeed eucen has been passionately advocating for VNIL for over three decades. In the 1990s small groups of eucen members were supported by the association to meet and discuss the topic and several members developed projects within the Leonardo programme of funding. In 2001 eucen became the coordinator of the TRANSFINE project that (a) investigated the feasibility of a European architecture for recognition, transfer and accumulation of qualifications; (b) created, developed and recommended the principles, methods and tools for that system; and (c) constructed a specification for pilot projects to test the tools. The REFINE project that eucen coordinated afterwards (2004) conducted the testing of TRANSFINE in a variety of settings and countries and with a wide range of stakeholders (HEIs, trade unions, employers, NGOs and so on).

In 2007 eucen started its OBSERVAL project and built the European Observatory on VNIL that collected over 100 documents on the topic from 27 different countries. In 2011 eucen continued its work with the OBSERVAL-Net follow up project, aiming to enhance and enlarge the original observatory, this time focusing on three key topics: the bottom-up approach, the VNIL new professions, and work-based VNIL. OBSERVAL-Net¹⁰ builded on the outcomes from the OBSERVAL project and created an advocacy pack to help individuals inform others about the VNIL tool and established a network of VNIL professionals that it is still ongoing in LinkedIn¹¹.

Subsequently in 2017 eucen started the VINCE project¹², and developed a set of tools to help HE staff to understand the situation of newcomers arriving to European countries, as well as the type of issues that can cause them anxiety and how they can be best supported. The tools developed include a number of guidelines to give adequate advice to newcomers, a platform for exchange of practices between VNIL professionals and policymakers, a course to train the VNIL professionals that work with newcomers, and a set of Policy Recommendations to influence policymakers. VINCE also reviewed and updated the outputs of OBSERVAL-Net and integrated the materials in a new platform.

eucen's "Core Principles for VNIL"

Through this comprehensive work in the VNIL area and through observation of the needs of individuals and the positive impact that VNIL processes can have on their life, eucen has identified 10 core principles that can enhance the effective implementation of VNIL as an essential tool, namely:

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¹⁰ OBSERVAL-Net project website <http://observal-net.eucen.eu>

¹¹ <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/6539538/>

¹² VINCE project website <https://vince.eucen.eu>

eucen's "Core Principles for VNIL"

1. **Promotion and Communication.** Decision makers need to actively engage in the promotion of VNIL so that it may be identified as a useful tool to encourage individuals to demonstrate their knowledge and prepare themselves for the next steps in their education journey. Promoting validation requires a systematic effort to demonstrate the relevance of all forms of learning and illustrate how validation is directly and legitimately relevant for further learning and employment (see also Cross, 2015). Providers must offer easily accessible and user-friendly information about how and where learners can engage in a VNIL process. Webpages and digital resources can aid in this process and are essential to reach a broad audience.
2. **Mainstreaming.** VNIL has to be moved from the margin to the mainstream and become a core part of the philosophy of HEIs' central strategy.
3. **Learner-centredness.** VNIL is a very personal process that should always focus on each individual's personal learning journey. Nuanced methods may need to be developed to address the needs of specific target groups such as older adults, those who are unemployed, those from poorer socio-economic and/or migrant backgrounds to ensure diverse learning experiences are recognised and that no one is left behind.
4. **Training.** Adequate training is essential for professionals working in the VNIL area so that they better understand their role and can better support learners to achieve their learning goals.
5. **Transparency.** VNIL processes must inspire confidence through ensuring that requirements of reliability, validity and quality assurance are met. The process must be conducted in a manner that is transparent, consistent, fair, and non-discriminatory.
6. **Efficiency.** Act quickly and efficiently to promote VNIL opportunities to potential learners, as well as ensuring that the VNIL processes are as efficient as possible to ensure that learners can be prepared as quickly as possible to fill skills shortages.
7. **Flexibility.** Make access and progression to education opportunities more flexible, valuing VNIL as an entry route and allowing learners the opportunity to demonstrate their skills and competences so that they may be deemed exempt from having to repeat the learning of knowledge and skills that they previously acquired.
8. **Reflection and self-assessment.** Promote the reflection dimension of the VNIL process amongst professionals working in this area to ensure continuous improvement of processes and procedures.
9. **Monitoring.** Create an evidence base for the impact of VNIL, ensure regular monitoring of how VNIL is affecting local/national unemployment levels and local/national engagement in continuing education and create year-on-year analyses that can be shared with other countries.
10. **Cooperation.** Identify other stakeholders working in VNIL and create a network for cooperation in order to share experiences, identify best practice and learn from others.

eucen is deeply committed to advocating for the inclusion of these 10 core principles in policies at both national and European levels.

Conclusions

eucen has always advocated for VNIL as a powerful tool for social inclusion that gives a second chance to individuals. This alternative route into higher education could help those who have been denied the opportunity to enter for a variety of social, political, legal or economic reasons. The VNIL processes ensure that candidates are recognised for what they have learned during their working life or their life experiences more generally. It helps candidates to identify, analyse and evaluate what they have learned from experience, relate it to formal studies and construct a claim to have their acquired knowledge recognised, and it gives visibility to the competences that, sometimes, individuals are not fully aware they have, thereby boosting both their motivation and self-esteem. In summary, VNIL is about being fair and giving credit to individuals' self-growth. A tool as powerful as this, connected with social inclusion, fully aligns with the main aims and objectives of an association like eucen.

Over the last three decades of eucen's work in the VNIL space, there has been much discussion at both national and European levels but practice on the ground is rather diverse and the implementation of VNIL varies significantly from country to country. While some higher education institutions, regions and countries have well-established VNIL processes and have transformed the lives of many VNIL participants, eucen contends that VNIL has - as yet - failed to achieve its full potential.

There is significant work still to do to ensure that learners across Europe can continue to thrive as our society changes. Senior leadership in HE must demonstrate their strong commitment to VNIL, ensuring that VNIL is supported and enabled in their institutions. Policy makers at both national and European levels must make serious efforts to build trust around VNIL processes to ensure that employers can have faith in the system, thereby enabling all types of learning to be equally valued. We implore EU countries to invest in VNIL in order to better understand the skills and knowledge of individuals that have not previously obtained HE qualifications and to give them the opportunity to have their experiential learning validated in order to allow them to progress in their studies and access new employment opportunities. This can only be of benefit to European society as a whole.

References

VINCE project <http://vince.eucen.eu>

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Cedefop section on VNIL <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning>

Cedefop European inventory on VNIL <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory>