

Validating volunteers' skills - how to get to the next level?

Since early 2010s, Sivis Study Centre, a Finnish liberal adult education institution providing training services for voluntary organisations, has put an effort on developing skills recognition and validation in the voluntary sector. The subject wasn't new but the viewpoint and methods were: at that point, there were much better digital systems and thus more possibilities for a widespread use than ever before. A digital study register and online certificates opened up the possibilities to show skills and knowledge gained from nonformal freetime studies in voluntary organisations, and Digital Open Badges offered a wide variety of skills recognition, appealing especially to the younger generations but usable for people of all ages.

Skills gained from training and practical work offered by voluntary organisations are valuable for the volunteer and the organisation itself and they should be valued more in formal educational institutions and in work life. To support this, we have put focus on learning and teaching learning outcome-based planning both to our own personnel and our member organisations' trainers. We offer digital services for skills recognition and participate in policy making as much as possible. We have also coordinated and participated in several Erasmus+ funded projects and developed methods for validating volunteers' skills.

Some of Sivis' member organisations have become very invested on skills validation and continued to develop their own trainings either in collaboration with Sivis or with other educational institutions. Despite the consistent work, there is still a lot to do. Of our 75 member organisations less than 20 use a possibility of digital certificates validated by Sivis and about 15 have experimented with digital badges. It is unknown to us if some of them create other kind of certificates on their own. It is also hard to tell how often or successfully the certificates or badges are utilised in VPL of formal education or in career development - though, at least when it comes to younger people seeking a summer job, leisure activities such as voluntary work is highly respected by employers.

In Finland, the reformation of vocational education and cuts of finances in the sector of tertiary education have increased the interest on students' prior skills and non-formal learning environments. A recent possibility has opened the national digital study register "Koski" for non-formal learning - there, every learner can see and share information on their competences to whoever they wish. The most recent development in education politics is a strong focus on continuous learning: a more fluid and personalised view on skills improvement of adults. There are also ongoing governmental processes around national digital ecosystem of skills validation.

The doors are open or at least opening up. What we are missing is a wide-scale interest on skills validation among voluntary organisations and volunteers. What should we do next to increase it? Do we really understand the needs of voluntary organisations, volunteers and others in active roles in the voluntary sector? Do we need more methods for validation or, perhaps, better ones? Or do the best methods already exist and we just need more information, motivation and inspiration to use them? Perhaps we need more than skills recognition: recognition of values, needs and attitudes.