

People, validation, and power: democracy in action?

1. About the VPL Biennale

The VPL Biennale is a dynamic global gathering, showcasing what the Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) contributes to effective national solutions for inclusion and lifelong learning in our shared international context of accelerated change and skills formation.

The Biennale is our opportunity to share essential ideas, knowledge, experience, information, and progress updates from the blending worlds of work, learning, human resource and learning management, innovation, credentialling and recognition. This VPL bi-annual meet up of our community provides state of the art master classes, exchanges of toolkits and new instruments, effective practices, and strategies for specific target groups.

The Biennale builds on the work of the previous four Biennales and is informed by the European Guidelines on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (Cedefop 2023) and other recent developments.

2. Validation of Prior Learning

VPL gives visibility and value to all forms of learning and seeks to uncover and unlock latent talent in the workforce and in society.

The 5th VPL Biennale focuses on validation, the individual, and empowerment. We explore the question: is a growth in validation practice evidence of democracy in action? As a participant you will be able to explore the different contexts in which validation processes, systems and opportunities are focused and reflect on the implicit dynamics, challenges, solutions, and implications of our current global practice. We invite you 'to come together to help each other' in the spirit of 'Pelkwaílċ-kt es knucwentwécw-kt' and 'Meitheal'. These cultural concepts of the Secwépemc people of Canada and of the Irish agrarian tradition mean that we accomplish more, respectfully, and faster, together than alone.

Validation plays a role in delivering ambitious policies for effective lifelong learning, inclusion, job market growth, skills, individual learning, and career pathways, protecting democracy, and making mobility a reality. Practitioners and champions advocate for implementation, inspired by the transformative impacts they observe for individuals in directing their own learning and career journey. Yet validation can challenge the very systems and dominant practices that are key to its success. Qualifications, academic standards, expert pedagogies, qualification frameworks, and quality assurance practices strive to adapt to accelerated change and ensure the creation of new knowledge, skills and attitudinal approaches, even in unconventional educational settings. Conscious of 'public good', attention focuses on opportunities for participation, the sites, methodologies and different contributions in the development and validation of knowledge, and the implicit development of new knowledge itself.

In this Biennale, we focus on empowerment as a key aspect of validation and examine how it affects and involves individuals and society. We seek to understand the various changes, consequences, and effects that come with empowerment. To do this, we consider different perspectives, such as those of individuals themselves, employers and human resource managers, entrepreneurs, volunteers, researchers and academics, education and training institutions, government officials, occupational

bodies, settlement and integration organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), recognition authorities, industry councils, as well as policy makers and influencers.

Under four sub-themes/ pillars, underpinned by the central theme of validation and democracy, you are invited to share your research, reflections, experience and evidence of progress in validation, critically reflecting on assumptions, engagement, empowerment and impacts. We invite a focus that considers future demands and required responses, practitioner skills and competences, and partnerships, including the identification of the potentially unique contribution of validation. Contexts will typically include education and training policy, practice and provision, workplace development policy and practices, including labour market activation, civil, social and community settings.

Using the questions under each sub-theme/ pillar, you are invited to consider if, or what policy and practice in these diverse settings is evidence of democracy in action. We encourage a focus on future needs and the necessary responses, the skills and abilities of practitioners, and partnerships. Additionally, we invite you to identify the unique contribution of validation supported by evidence.

3. Validation and democracy

The theme of the 5th Biennale explores democracy and validation through the four sub-themes/ pillars of the individual, skills, inclusion, and mobility.

The opening plenary session will explore the overarching theme of democracy and validation with the lead question: does validation force a re-evaluation of valid knowledge and of the relationships between authorities in the development of different kinds and ways of knowing?

Validation can be understood as an expression of democracy in itself; the active engagement of a wide range of actors as an inevitable expression of the impact of mass education. Accelerated global knowledge and competency creation and changing combinations of competency requirements outside previously anticipated contexts contribute to raising expectations of VPL.

Advocates for validation state that the practice requires inclusive, resourced decision making, a willingness to engage steadily with diversity and disruptive forces and technologies that shape new opportunities, including new perspectives and ways of knowing.

Sub questions connect to issues related to standards, reference points, transparency, and value of certificates. These will be explored in the plenary and/or reflected in consideration of the four sub-themes/ pillars.

- How strong are our constructs for our engagement to support validation practices, our readiness and resilience in the face of change?
- Given mobility and global knowledge, research, and economic community interdependencies, how do we prepare in ourselves an attitude of global citizenship? To what extent can validation express and support openness to new and diverse learning?
- In considering the question of democracy, who determines what standards are used within validation and how is this agreed?
- Has your experience of validation shifted a balance of power in your personal practice and context?
- The concept of gatekeeping carries an undercurrent of negativity, exclusion, and the protection of elitism. How do you identify and characterise gatekeepers from your practice?
- When, where and how does validation support, disrupt and protect gatekeeping?

- How does your 'enhancement' focus invite reflective examination of underlying assumptions within policy and practice?

3.1. Validation and the individual: democracy in action?

Lead question: How does validation place the individual at the centre?

- Validation practice prizes the individual and their learning as the central concern. In your experience and from your research, what changes are necessary in approach to curriculum and pedagogy, standards/learning outcomes, assessment practices, quality assurance, qualifications, and qualification frameworks?
- What should we learn about putting the individual at the centre of what we do and what conditions and supports, including lifelong guidance systems, make this effective?
- Who decides what is valid knowledge?
- Who empowers the individual and how? When might empowerment for one group or individual mean disempowerment for another group or individual?
- In keeping with effective lifelong learning, validation seeks to support democratic citizenship and empower individuals to identify the opportunities that build on their learning. In what ways do systems need to be structured and scaffolded to give an individual ownership of their own pathways?
- What kind of coordination mechanisms are used to ensure that individuals are served where they live, study and work? Are possibilities, costs and benefits of validation becoming clearer and the outcomes more portable?
- Has your experience of validation shifted a balance of power in your personal practice and context?
- How compelling is the evidence base that validation strengthens the resilience of an individual?

You are invited to share initiatives and approaches that have prized the individual driving validation, to elaborate what you have learned, your conclusions on changes and implications required of the engagement and on the added value.

3.2. Validation and skills: democracy in action?

Lead Question: How can validation be quickly harnessed to prepare the individual, workplace and workforce for the future while truly respecting and valuing the process of skills acquisition?

- How does our understanding of skills and embodied knowledge impact our validation processes?
- Validation of what we know and can do is seen as a key feature of resilient employment sectors and strategies, enabling continued and flexible participation in the labour market, and supporting competitive economies. What characteristics make the validation of skills an inclusive lifelong and life-wide practice?
- How can the validation of skills and knowledge gained in diverse contexts contribute to new knowledge and to the personal, professional, and economic success of individuals?
- What evidence have we that validation increases academic, cultural and/or economic excellence?

- Who determines what is important to be validated and how does this affect individuals and communities of practice?
- How does validation drive or enhance engagement between individuals, educators and employers?
- The diversity of stakeholders- HR and training management, innovation leads, employee representative groups and education stakeholders may each have distinct ways of knowing and valuing an individual's skills and knowledge; do expectations compete, are roles and purposes clarified and prioritised in validation?
- In the context of global megatrends like digitalisation and climate change, can validation enhance the resilience of individual, communities, and employers? If so, how?
- In your experience, how do the diversity of outcomes of recognition and contexts align, and are the benefits equitable?
- How compelling is the evidence base that validation strengthens skills recognition?

You are invited to share specific initiatives and approaches that focus on validation and skills, to elaborate what you have learned, your conclusions on changes and implications required of the engagement and on the added value, for whom.

3.3. Validation and inclusion: democracy in action?

Lead Question: How can validation be an enabler to empowering local whilst thinking global?

- What is the real contribution of validation – at system, policy and implementation level, in opening up the power of diverse people and groups?
- Does validation increase and extend engagement and opportunity? How? For whom? To what? What impacts have you experienced working with diverse individuals, groups/cohorts and sectors?
- What impacts were experienced by individuals who had experiential learning validated, culturally, socially, and practically?
- Whose learning is valued within validation and how is this determined? Who decides what learning is valued within validation?
- What supports and challenges are necessary to inclusively honour everyone's engagement?
- How equitably are individuals enabled to engage in validation?
- What is the value of validation and inclusion in balancing individual, societal and economic interests?
- What is the evidence base of validation for social cohesion and economic engagement?
- We lose out on the unique cultural, social, and professional contribution of those who don't participate in common democratic structures. How can validation be more effectively used to include all individuals? How compelling is the evidence base that validation strengthens inclusion?

You are invited to share specific initiatives that cross and connect boundaries. Please explain what you have learned from these experiences, the conclusions you have drawn regarding the changes and implications required by engagement in validation and on the added value that comes with it.

3.4. Validation and mobility: democracy in action?

Lead question: Does validation support mobility while respecting cultural and sub-cultural difference?

- Validation is increasingly acknowledged as essential to supporting effective mobility for people. This can include physical mobility across jurisdictions and sectors for economic and personal opportunity, professional development and for survival, including arising from the distress of war, climate change and disaster. It also includes the subsequent integration in a new context.
- How can we strengthen our approaches so that we value and respect diverse cultural knowledge and ways of understanding?
- Are our recognition frameworks and constructs sufficient for fair recognition? In preparing for the implementation of the Global Recognition Convention what one thing would you do to improve your capacity to respond to validation needs in support of mobility?
- How can we best appreciate, be sensitive to and preserve unique cultural knowledge within recognition frameworks in a globalized world?
- Are we capable of being responsive to individual needs, what challenges you most in your context?
- Are systems and processes operating as gatekeepers to opportunities for individuals?
- What does validation practice look like when applied in emergency contexts?
- What is your experience of toolkits specifically developed for migrants and refugees and how do they differ from those developed for other target audiences?
- Does mobility challenge standards and reference points for validation, in your experience, in capturing skills, for individuals and for inclusion?
- Where someone moves from one jurisdiction to another how can recognition and partial recognition be best supported?
- What does validation for national, regional, and global mobility require of systems, processes and the creation of opportunity?
- What kind of processes and supports for individuals can be implemented to further include people on the move?
- How compelling is the evidence base that validation positively strengthens mobility?

You are invited to share specific initiatives that focus on validation and mobility across and within jurisdictions. Please discuss what you have learned from these experiences, your conclusions regarding the necessary changes and implications for engagement. Finally, what is the added value for whom in validation and mobility contexts.