



Empowering students in lifelong learning

Forging a new practice of VPL in Icelandic universities

Dr. Anna Magnea Hreinsdóttir
Dublin – May 2024

Introduction

The European Union issued a recommendation to implement practical skills assessment at all school levels by 2018

A report on validation of prior learning at the university level from 2017 has played a role in moving the issue forward at the university level

Validation of prior learning was piloted in preschool teacher training at the University of Iceland's Faculty of Education in 2021

This presentation focuses on a collaborative project in four universities in Iceland [the University of Iceland, the University of Akureyri, the University of Reykjavík and the Iceland University of the Arts]

The project is funded by the ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation

Project aim and purpose

The aim of this collaborative project is to develop and implement VPL to shorten studies in around ten study programs in four universities in Iceland

Each university will choose study paths that are considered suitable, including teacher studies, fashion design, graphic design, police studies, leisure studies and industrial and technical studies

The purpose of the project is that the universities have similar, transparent validation processes

The universities will set up a joint validation process that is partly based on the experience that has already been gained in VPL in preschool teacher studies at the University of Iceland's Faculty of Education

Background

VPL is one of the most effective tools in the education sector to lower barriers and encourage people with work experience to start studying, as experience and acquired skills contribute to shortening the study time (Statens offentliga utredningar, 2018)

It is a tool that can be used to assess the skills of immigrants and provide them with ways to have their skills assessed

The introduction of VPL at Icelandic universities thus increases the possibility that individuals can get acquired skills and informal learning validated to shorten studies at university level

Empowering learning process

The individuals who undergo VPL can experience the validation as an empowering process (Andersson et al., 2013; Karpíšek and Garbuglia, 2021).

Participation in validation can also be seen as a learning process (Andersson, 2017)

Three dimensions of this learning process are identified:

- to learn what you know – that is to develop awareness of your prior learning
- to learn what is required in a validation process
- to learn how to present your knowledge to get recognition

Research on VPL at university level in Iceland

About 60 students in Iceland have been through the validation process

Seven courses were selected that are taught in preschool teacher education at the University of Iceland

Varied methods were used in the validation interviews

The validation interviews challenging but the whole validation process had been supportive and encouraging

The students found that the interviews were a good way for them to show the knowledge and skills they had gained in their work in preschools

This supports the idea about the importance of giving those who are working in preschools without preschool teacher education an opportunity to get their experience and knowledge validated to shorten the preschool teachers' studies

Method – Two-year workplan

Year 2024

Formation of a steering group for each study path
Workshop for project representatives
Selection of courses and conversation with teachers
Selection of project managers, student counselors and evaluators
Evaluation process design
Creation of guidelines for writing learning outcomes
Review of course learning outcomes
Presentation of VPL for students
Selection of students
Training of VPL assessors

Year 2025

Conducting VPL
Evaluation of the process
Focus group interviews with students
Focus group interviews with project managers
Focus group interviews with evaluators
Summary of results
Completion of a handbook on VPL at University level
Proposal for regulation
Proposal for funding
Conference

Novelty

The implementation of the VPL process at university level in Iceland in collaboration between multiple universities

The experience and knowledge that has been created both at secondary school level and in the preschool teacher studies at the University of Iceland can be used in other study programs at Icelandic universities

The advantages of shortening the study time are pointed out and that the VPL could lead to increased recruitment and better utilization of courses.

VPL can increase the quality of education through the development of learning outcomes for courses and the development of teaching plans

Perspectives on how to meet students with different experiences and how that experience can be enriching for other students with more traditional backgrounds were also highlighted as positive consequences

Expected benefits

VPL empowers individuals for further education and contributes to shorter study time, which can both reduce stress and increase motivation for further study

The VPL supplies the labor market with qualified personnel more quickly

Experience from a development project of VPL at the University of Iceland's Faculty of Education showed that the process leads to clearer learning outcomes for courses and increased teacher competence in writing learning criteria and thus to increased quality in teaching

For the universities, VPL can increase the diversity of the student body and help attract more people to the program without reducing requirements

By implementing a similar process of VPL through university collaboration, it is possible to ensure equality, transparency and the quality of the process and the results

Expected challenges

Challenges to overcome are for example:

- different cultures in the different universities,
- hurdles concerning attitudes of academic staff,
- skills in writing measurable learning outcomes,
- creating tools and processes that fit all universities to create solutions which would secure learners equal treatment in all participating institutions

Expected outputs

The products of the project will be:

- a handbook on the process of VPL at university level;
- common VPL processes at four universities;
- knowledge within each school about writing learning standards;
- a clear process of VPL and interviews;
- trained assessors;
- a proposal that could be used in the preparation of a regulation on VPL at university level;
- a proposal for funding for the future.

A conference will be held at the end of the project where its products will be presented

At last – some thoughts

How can we make the VPL process a part of university practice for students and for educators?

How can the validation process become an empowering learning process?

How can we make sure that the students are aware of and able to present their knowledge?

How can we ensure the variation in the students' knowledge depending on where, and how, they have learnt the content of the courses that are to be validated?

How can the validation process include new learning for both assessors and students?