Title: Supporting migrants in the process of Validation of Prior learning (VPL) – a French perspective

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Summary: Valuing Prior Learning (VPL) has become a major issue in Europe, especially for non-formal and informal learning as underlined by the Cedefop. In France, the process of VPL has a long history with the highlight of the 2002 Act dedicated to Social modernization, setting the basis for assessing a professional experience understood on a broader sense (paid, unpaid and voluntary activity). On the basis of 3 former projects implemented in Europe since 2003 (Vaeb, Va2el and Vab), we intend to illustrate this attempt to identify, value and assess different kinds of non-formal and informal learning. We will emphasise the added value of the ALLinHE project, focused on people with special needs (50+, migrants and disabled people). In the last part of our article we explain the support to be provided to migrants and councilors to enhance the process of VPL, based on a French experience, in the framework of workshops offered at the Cité des Métiers in Paris (2012-2013).

Supporting migrants in Valuing Prior Learning (VPL), a French perspective - Introduction

I. Valuing Prior Learning (VPL)
   1.1 in Europe
   1.2 VPL in France since 2002

II. VPL in perspective
   2.1 the holistic approach of VPL (Cedefop, 2009) & examples (Vaeb, Va2el and Vab)
   2.2 a focus on public with special needs: the ALLinHE approach

III. VPL for migrants, from experience to competence
   3.1 the Migrapass approach, a tool & companion for migrants
   3.2 the ALLinHE approach, a support for VPL councilors
   3.3 the feedback received by migrant audiences (weaknesses & strengths)

Supporting migrants in Valuing Prior Learning (VPL), a French perspective - Conclusion

Keywords:
- Competences
- Validation of Prior Learning
- Formal learning
- Non-formal learning
- Informal learning
- Labour market
- Migration
- Portfolio
- Public with special needs

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Introduction

In the recommendation on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, the European Parliament and the Council (2008) state that

“The development and recognition of citizens’ knowledge, skills and competence are crucial for the development of individuals, competitiveness, employment and social cohesion in the Community. Such development and recognition should facilitate transnational mobility for workers and learners and contribute to meeting the requirements of supply and demand in the European labour market. Access to and participation in lifelong learning for all, including disadvantaged people, and the use of qualifications should therefore be promoted and improved at national and Community level”.

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) published in 2009 the “European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning” designed to strengthen the comparability and transparency of validation approaches and methods across national boundaries. The European Centre underlines that the concept of national qualifications system is now accepted (OECD, 2007) as

“all aspects of a country’s activity that result in recognition of learning. These systems include the means of developing and putting in place national or regional policy on qualifications, institutional arrangements, quality assurance processes, assessment and awarding processes, skills recognition and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society”.

The experts of the Cedefop point out the terminological challenges. On the one hand, identification of non-formal and informal learning is seen as a process which “records and makes visible the individual’s learning outcomes. This does not result in a formal certificate or diploma, but I may provide the basis for such formal recognition”. On the other hand, validation of non-formal and informal learning “is based on the assessment of the individual’s learning outcomes and may result in a certificate or diploma”. The distinction between identification and validation reflects the distinction drawn between formative and summative assessment in research literature.

We intend to show in our article the importance of taking into account the diversity of VPL by combining the legal framework (on a macro-level), the implementation of the process (on a meso-level) and the profiles of VPL candidates (on a micro-level).

In a first part, we will underline how Valuing Prior Learning (VPL) has become a major issue in Europe, especially for non-formal and informal learning (Cedefop, 2009) in the past twelve years. In France, the process of VPL has a long history with the highlight of the 2002 Act dedicated to Social modernization, setting the basis for assessing a professional experience understood in a broader sense (paid, unpaid and voluntary activity).

In a second part, on the basis of 3 former projects implemented in Europe since 2003 (Vaeb, Va2el and Vab), we will illustrate several attempts to identify, value and assess different kinds of non-formal and informal learning. We will emphasise the added value of the ALLinHE project, focused on publics with special needs (50+, migrants and disabled people).

In a last part, we will explain the support to be provided to migrants and councilors to enhance the process of VPL. This concrete example is based on a French experience, the workshops offered to migrant audiences at the Cité des Métiers in Paris (2012-2013) in the framework of the ALLinHE project.
I. Valuing Prior Learning (VPL)

As underlined by European experts (Duvekot, 2007 & 2014), the international terminology is quite diverse: Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) or Validation of Prior Learning (VPL). The most important element in an APL-strategy is the assessment of the competencies that are collected in a portfolio with the goal of getting exemptions or a diploma. In RPL, the primary focus lies on the identification and recognition of the competencies that someone might have obtained in any period in his/her life and in any kind of learning environment. In Validation of Prior Learning (VPL), it goes a step further than accreditation and recognition since it means a validation (or valuation) of prior learning measured against any learning objective and not just formalized standards. Whatever the terminology, the main idea in the process of APL, RPL or VPL is to take into account skills and competences in order to have an access to a diploma or certification and so to an official recognition (or even validation) of a learning acquired in many places (at work, in leisure time activities and at home).

1. VPL in Europe

In the introduction to its European Guidelines (Cedefop, 2009), the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training underlines that

“Validating non formal and informal learning is increasingly seen as a way of improving lifelong learning and lifewide learning. More European countries are emphasizing the importance of making visible and valuing learning that takes place outside formal education and training institutions, for example at work, in leisure time activities and at home”.

Policy-makers and practitioners are faced to main challenges to support this process. On the one hand they must propose a legal or at least official framework to enhance the process (top down approach), on the other hand they must offer concrete tool and method to support the process on the ground in order to make it be a reality (bottom up approach). In this perspective, the Cedefop also points out the interdependence of validation of non-formal and informal learning and certification in the formal education and training system together with a broader range of stakeholders than required by formal learning. This is the main challenge to tackle.

Thanks to the reform of the Universities in Europe (Bologna process, 1999) accreditation in higher education is more comparable from one country to another especially for the employers. This is a key issue in enhancing mobility across Europe. Moreover, each of the countries has made an effort to express the content of the degrees, diplomas and certificates with regards to the skills and competences acquired and their link with the labour market (types of employment to be proposed). The Bologna process was designed to introduce a system of academic degrees that are easily recognisable and comparable, promote the mobility of students, teachers and researchers, ensure high quality teaching and incorporate the European dimension into higher education. Tangibly, the Bologna Declaration involved six actions relating to: a system of academic degrees that are easy to recognise and compare (a shared diploma supplement to improve transparency); a system based essentially on two cycles: a first cycle geared to the labour market and lasting at least three years, and a second cycle (Master’s) conditional on the completion of the first cycle; a system of accumulation and transfer of credits of the ECTS type used in the Erasmus exchange scheme; mobility of students, teachers and researchers: elimination of all obstacles to freedom of movement; cooperation with regard to quality assurance; the European dimension in higher education: an increase in the number of modules and teaching and study areas where the content, guidance or organisation has a European dimension (Bologna Declaration, 1999).

Complementing this clarification on formal learning, the Copenhagen process (Declaration by the European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training, and the European Commission,
Copenhagen 2002) was intended to validate non-formal and informal learning. It is as an element of the National Qualification Framework (NQF) apart from the Bologna process. The Copenhagen process enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training (VET) aimed to improve the performance, quality and attractiveness of VET in Europe. It seeks to encourage the use of the various vocational training opportunities within the lifelong learning (LLL) context and with the help of the LLL tools. It consisted of: a political dimension, aiming to establish common European objectives and reform national VET systems; the development of common European frameworks and tools that increase the transparency and quality of competences and qualifications and facilitate mobility; cooperation to foster mutual learning at European level and to involve all relevant stakeholders at national level. The priorities set by the Copenhagen Declaration provide the basis for voluntary cooperation in VET. With the target of 2010, they aim to reinforce the European dimension in VET, increase information, guidance and counselling on, as well as the transparency of VET and develop tools for the mutual recognition and validation of competences and qualifications.

2. VPL in France since 2002

The national legislation for France is the Law n°2002-73 of the 17th of January 2002; termed the “Loi de modernisation sociale” it set a new paradigm named “Validation des acquis de l’expérience” (acronym: VAE). It can be used as a basis to award full qualifications, rather than just units or “parts” of a full diploma and so can be equivalent to a complete assessment leading to an award of formal qualifications (Charraud, 2007).

Since 2002, it has been modified and enriched, taking into account different situations. In 2014, the law includes 5 main points: VPL for access to diploma or certification with a professional goal (articles integrated in the Labour Code, in the education Code); VPL for access to national diploma of Higher Education (articles integrated in the Education Code); VPL for mothers or any person with family duties in order to have an access to a national diploma of Higher Education (articles integrated in the Education Code); a special “holiday” is offered in order to follow the process of VPL; a special point is underlined for engineers with a State Diploma.

The national guidance is provided by the National Vocational Certification Commission (Commission Nationale de la Certification Professionnelle- CNCP, http://www.cncp.gouv.fr/). The CNCP was created on the basis of the Law n°2002-73 of the 17th of January 2002 in order to provide information about the process of VAE, to decide the validity of the application, to propose a portfolio or “dossier” to be filled by the candidate describing her/his experience, to provide any relevant information to the “jury” for assessing their experience and competences. Some documents or practical guides are also provided by trades unions, or training bodies. To complement this, a public portal on VAE has been implemented explaining the different ways to have an access to VPL for VPL candidates but also for organisations in charge of VPL (http://www.vae.gouv.fr/)

The national strategy driving the legislation has started in France since 1934 when a specific procedure was set up to permit some “engineers” working in a firm without having the diploma of “engineer”. In the 1970s, with the development of continuing education, it appeared that it would be more economical to set curriculum according to the needs of the target groups concerned taking into account their prior learning. At the beginning of the 1980s a national policy trend proposed to increase the number of people entering into higher education and so open the doors to direct access to Higher Education without having the Baccalauréat. The Law n°92-678 of the 20th of July 1992 promoted by the Ministry of Labour created the “Validation des acquis professionnels (VAP)”. Ten years after was adopted the Law on Validation des acquis de l’expérience (VAE).

On a national level, the only organization financed directly by the Ministry of Labour is the National Commission for professional Certification (CNCP) whose main mission is to update the National Repertoire for Professional Certification (RNCP) and to provide information on VPL in France. As far
as the candidates are concerned, the PARE (Plan d'aide au retour à l'emploi), or PAP (Projet d'action personnalisé) are the two main devices explaining how this is financed. It is not paid on a national level but on both meso and micro-levels. The regional councils (local authorities in charge of training and employment) may also offer some financial support to candidates (chèque VAE) or the National agency for Employment.

There is no national policy for financing the application of VPL in general. It is closely linked to the special situation of the VPL candidates, and the organization he/she is addressing so both individuals (micro-level) and organisations (meso-level) are involved. It mainly depends on the status of the VPL candidate: paid staff, job-seeker, independent worker, civil servant, artist (special status), professional with a special contract (supported jobs), disabled people, EU nationals, refugee, prisoner. As a result the process will be financed on a collective or individual basis.

The responsibility of any institution in charge of VPL is to inform the candidates about the opportunities, to check whether the diploma/certification identified by the candidates is linked to the professional experience of the candidates, to check with the candidates whether the documents/information gathered are relevant, to prepare the candidates to the panel in front of which the VOL candidates will have to present themselves, to justify their experience and to show the skills and competences acquired (using for instance a portfolio).

The main VPL functions to be filled in by VPL professionals are the following: explaining the main legislation (basis of the VPL); presenting the RNCP in order for the candidates to identify the diploma they could select; supporting candidates to fill the form to apply for the “eligibility” of the process (whether the experience of the candidate is relevant for the competences and so diploma); supporting the candidate to fill the dossier in order to submit the all files to the panel – it may require 3 to 5 days (even more depending on the candidate). The length of time from the very first step to the last step may last one year or more.

Since the 2002 law, many points have been integrated in the VPL process focusing on the profiles of the candidates (house keepers, engineers, volunteers…) and/or on the kind of activities (paid, unpaid or voluntary activities such as family duties, volunteering…) in order to be as comprehensive as possible in the non-formal and informal learning.

II. VPL in perspective

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop, 2009) explains the two approaches for validating non formal and informal learning: formative and summative assessment. The formative approach to assessment is important as it draws attention to the identification of knowledge, skills and wider competences, a crucial part of lifelong learning. The summative validation needs to have a clearly defined and unambiguous link to the standards used in the national qualifications system (or framework). Aligning with this, the Cedefop emphasizes the three kinds of learning to be taken into account: formal, non-formal and informal learning.

1) the holistic approach of VPL: formal, non-formal and informal learning

In its European guidelines, the Cedefop explains the three forms of learning to be taken into account:

- **formal learning**, occurs in an organised and structured context (in a school/training centre or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Formal learning is intentional from the learner’s point of view. It typically leads to qualification or certification.
• **non-formal learning**, is learning embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) but with an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner’s point of view. It typically does not lead to certification.

• **informal learning**, results from daily work-related, family or leisure activities. It is not organised or structured (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner’s perspective. It typically does not lead to certification.

As far as the formal learning is concerned, this is the easier part for VPL candidates to justify their experience and so the gained skills and competences as this type of learning is certified by a formal body: either educative body (school, university…) or training body or people in charge of human resources in firms (in the framework of vocational training). As far as informal and non-formal learning is concerned, this is more difficult for a VPL candidate as they must collect all the relevant information and justify the connection with the diploma or certification they mean to prepare in the VPL process.

Three European projects, implemented in the past ten years, have meant to design tool & methods to identify, value and/or assess non formal and informal learning. They have been supported in the framework of the Lifelong learning programme, sub-programme Leonardo da Vinci: the Vaeb project (iriv and ali, 2003-2006, www.eEuropeassociations.net), the Va2el project (INDL & iriv and ali, 2008-2010, www.va2el.eu, and the VAB project (University of Evry Val d’Essone-Ueve & iriv, 2009-2011, www.vab-univ.eu)

The first project, "VAEB- Assessing Voluntary Experience in a professional perspective", led by iriv (France) gathered 7 countries, between 2003-2006. It was awarded in Helsinki in 2006 for excellent practice in addressing the priorities of the Copenhagen process and promoting an enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training. The innovative approach was to propose to value non-formal and informal learning, on the basis of a voluntary experience. These skills and competences still neglected by the labour market have become crucial for the employability to meet the moving needs of the employers. The Vaeb addressed mainly youngsters, women and long-term unemployed people. It used self-evaluation of skills and competences, by volunteers themselves supported by a portfolio. As a result of this pioneer project, a voluntary experience was officially recognised as an informal and non-formal learning by the European Commission, in 2011, on the occasion of the European Year of Volunteering (EYV2011).

The VA2EL-Valuing Experience and Education of Local councillors, initiated by iriv together with the National Institute for Local Development (INDL) proposed to identify, evaluate and validate skills and qualifications acquired by local councillors as an informal learning for a professional purpose. Six countries were selected: France, Austria, Greece, Italy, Lithuania and Poland. The VA2EL project designed a portfolio, available through Internet (e-portfolio) for local councillors to help them identify and value the specific skills and competences acquired through their elected experience together with a handbook to use it in the labour market. The impact of the Va2el project was to better take into account the experience acquired by local councillors, to underline the required professionalization of their activity, and so to enhance recognition of their specific experience in the labour market. They could value key competences enhanced by the Lisbon strategy: social and civic competences, entrepreneurship and leadership spirit, and digital competence (with the e-portfolio).

The third project, “VAB- Valuing experience beyond University”, led by the Ueve & iriv, gathered 5 countries between 2009 and 2011. The Vab project allowed students to identify activities fulfilled in complement to their University courses. It was a more holistic approach to value non formal and informal learning as four types of activities to be taken into account in the e-portfolio designed by the VAB: Sport, culture and art activities; involvement in association and active citizenship (association, student trade-union or political party); professional activities (training periods, “students job”);
transnational /mobility activities (individual convention or in the framework of exchange programs such as the European Voluntary service or Erasmus or Leonardo mobility). The learning outcomes students might have developed could be expressed in terms of competences and to be valued on the labour market thanks to an e-portfolio to be filled by students and supported by University teachers & trainers (UTT).

These three projects designed a tool: a portfolio for the Vaeb, an e-portfolio for the Va2el and the VAB, which might be used to prepare a VPL process. The bottom-up approach enhanced by European projects under the lifelong learning programme was most appropriate to design such tools & methods on a European level to be applied afterwards on national levels.

2) A focus on people with special needs, the ALLinHE approach

In complement to the process (tool & method), it is also most important to focus on the profiles of VPL candidates. This is the main added value of the ALLinHE project, an Erasmus project led by the Inholland University in Netherlands, Finland, Denmark, France, Romania, Slovenia, UK & South Korea, under the Erasmus sub-programme (2011-2014, www.ALLinHE.eu).

The ALLinHE links the methods of Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) to a practical strategy for the social inclusion of special target groups underrepresented and non-traditional learners: migrants & ethnic minorities, persons aged over 50 years and disabled people.

Europe needs dynamic Higher Education (HE) to stay competitive but HE lacks an “open door policy”. Top down facilities are in place (legislation, EQF, etc) but practical methodology for opening up HE (bottom-up practices) often fails. VPL opens and supports learning chances for citizens but is mostly under developed and under-utilised. Testing innovative VPL should facilitate access to HE for social inclusion of target-groups and bridge the gap between the top-down and the bottom-up practices in HE. The main assumption of the project is that transforming existing VPL-methodology into a multi-targeted approach not only innovates the methodology of VPL but also orients HE into learning opportunities for all.

The project implements:

1. a multi-targeted VPL model providing a diagnostic or personalized, formative and summative approaches;
2. a comparative analysis of the VPL methods and approaches for the three main identified target groups;
3. a training programme for HE professionals to learn how to work with the VPL model;
4. a pilot of the multi-targeted VPL model with target groups and synthesis of test results, focusing on managing Europe’s diversity;
5. a transversal analysis of new strategies and methods resulting in a handbook highlighting best practices for HE professionals with the multi-targeted VPL model;
6. an ALLinHE network gathering research, tests and evaluations of inclusive VPL practices;
7. a proposal of a European academic bank credit system.

Within the framework of the ALLinHE, a French experience was conducted by the Institute for Research and Information on Volunteering (iriv) among migrants.

III. VPL for migrants - an applied case for France

Thanks to the ALLinHE project, several workshops were offered by iriv in partnership with the Cité des Métiers in Paris. They gathered migrants coming from different countries and continents (South America, Africa, Asia and Europe) and with different backgrounds (graduate or low qualified people).
We will first present the methodological content of the workshops offered (2012-2013). We will then describe with the support provided to VPL councillors. We will then explain the weaknesses and strengths of a VPL for migrants, taking into account their profile (personal and professional) and their expectations, on the basis of their feedback.

1) the Migrapass approach, an appropriate tool to support migrants’ routes

In the European guidelines (Cedefop, 2009), the experts analyzed the methods and instruments used to identify, assess and attribute recognition to learning that takes place outside formal education and training institution. The outcomes of these learning processes are diverse and multidimensional. The experts have noted an extensive use of portfolio approaches. They have also insisted on the fact that the selection process included in portfolio building “promotes self-assessment and focuses learners’ attention on quality criteria”. A good portfolio for validation, according to the assessors, is characterized by being easy to assess because it is focused on specific matched learning outcomes.

The Migrapass project, a Leonardo da Vinci project, led by Autemonde and iriv, in five countries, between 2010 and 2012 (www.migrapass.eu), designed a tool and methodology - a portfolio together with a companion - to support migrants to express their experience, identify their skills and competences, and to define the possible areas of employment, in the light of knowledge and skills developed through their individual experience: professional (including training,), social (volunteer work), personal, etc.

The tool and method – a portfolio & companion – are meant to support migrants’ capabilities to synthesize and value their experience (personal, social, professional…) in order to value them on the labour market. Using the portfolio, migrants can write their own profile, through a self-analysis of the knowledge and skills, useful to give them value and put into a single tool and method (the e-portfolio) the various experiences of the migrants, including informal and non-formal experiences.

The portfolio process follows a three step process. The first step identifies relevant experiences acquired by migrants (professional and social experience together with the migration experience). The second step proposes a detailed description of the migrant’s experience replacing it in its context (environment, available resources, and constraints for its achievement…). A third step is dedicated to the migrants’ competences which emerge from the description of the experience. The more the experience has been described, the better the competence can be identified and made transferable.

The migrant’s route may be considered as a holistic experience. In the Migrapass portfolio, migrants are asked to identify and describe their professional experience both in their country of origin and the host country. The social experience has to be taken into account: it includes any kind of active citizenship activities (being a volunteer in an association, being an elected member of a local authority, being a member of the council of a village…). A migration experience gathers both internal and external migrations. The last type of experience is the personal and family experience (and the responsibilities within the family).

The core of the portfolio process is to express the experience in terms of competence. Twelve main competences are proposed to migrants: competence linked to the ability of making things, to managing and organising oneself, to developing a migration project, to working in a team, to communicating, to developing networks, to collecting and efficiently using information, to overcoming a difficult situation, to living and working in a different cultural environment, to transferring one's professional experience, to joining a new community, to defending rights. Migrants are asked to identify the competences most relevant to their experience and for their employment research and to evaluate the level of achievement corresponding to each of the competences: assisted competence (level 1), collaborative competence (level 2), autonomous competence (level 3), expert competence (level 4), and creative competence (level 5).
In the last part of the portfolio (the action plan), migrants are offered the opportunity to start a VPL process as a European diploma or a qualification is often required on the EU labour markets to be able to work as professionals. The Migrapass portfolio is the first part of the VPL process: being able to identify one’s experience, then being able to express this experience in terms of competences and at last being convinced that the most appropriate way to assess/validate these competences is a diploma or certification.

2) the ALLinHE perspective, an appropriate support for VPL councillors

The Migrapass and the ALLinHE share the same spirit:

- opening doors and changing perspectives especially among underrepresented target groups in the lifelong learning perspective (the example of migrants);
- integrating different tools & approaches to manage diversity (on a European and non-European levels);
- implementing a holistic approach combining personal, social and professional experiences;
- facilitating the access to VPL in enhancing a mentoring approach: trainers/mentors are offered a special strategy (assessor training manual for the ALLinHE);
- combining the top-down and the bottom-up approaches: both are important to better understand the opportunities offered by VPL (micro-level, meso-level and macro-level);
- considering the validation of competences as a two way process.

The competence approach is a key issue in a successful professional integration in the long term. Because of the lack of national experience or because of the linguistic issue, migrants could be, in the short term, oriented on very basic tasks and low qualified employments. In the mid-term or long-term, the Migrapass approach allows them to improve their professional career and to make a positive choice: either to stay in their present position or to change it in valuing other competences.

The most important risks underlined by the Cedefop experts, in the process of validating non formal and informal learning, are when applicants prepare the portfolio alone or with little mediation from one tutor. Learning by doing and by transmitting one’s own experience to other migrants is the basic philosophy of the Migrapass. This is part of the empowerment spirit: making migrants be the main agents of their own integration. Some of the “trainees” are selected to become tutors in the future with other migrants.

Raising awareness of councillors in charge of VPL on the special profile and expectations of migrant publics was a main concern of the ALLinHE project. The first step was to dispatch among them the tool, the Migrapass portfolio as the first tool designed in France to take into account experiences and competences acquired thanks to migratory background. The approach is holistic: the Migrapass portfolio combines professional, social and migratory experiences in order to express them in terms of competences. This was the important to point to underline: a migratory experience is not central but valued in complement to other experiences (professional, social, personal…). For migrants who have no professional experience (in the sense of paid activity) in France, it was important to show that voluntary experience could be considered as a “professional experience” on condition that they could provide all the relevant elements to prove the reality and relevance of the volunteering (in terms of activities fulfilled and competences acquired).

The second main point was to underline the requirements for being an efficient VPL assessor. A guide was dispatched, based on the councils provided by the Assessor Training Manual published by VPL experts in Netherlands (Duvekot, 2012 and Kappe, Smits & Bekker, 2011). The method insisted on the 9 main competences any train assessor should possess: Managing, Presenting, Learning, Guiding,
Commitment and conviction, Applying professionality, Attention and understanding, Ethics and integrity, Management of the needs and Expectations of the “customer”. If the 8 first points could be easily understood, the last point could raise some problem among VPL councillors who are not familiar to work with migrant audiences. The guide also emphasized the different roles to be played by VPL councillors: speaker, leader, coach, organizer, advisor, developer.

At last, it was crucial to underline that lifelong learning, as integration, is a two way process. Bridging the gap between University and the Community is a challenging issue. Even though University remains the place to deliver diplomas and to propose a reference framework of qualifications, the door is open to any kind of learning to be assessed thanks to the recognition of VPL in many European countries. People from civil society, both professionals and/or volunteers, have already been associated with the assessment of learning outcomes as far as their activity may be concerned by the VPL. A “new deal” of the validation of competences would consist in enhancing a circular approach of lifelong learning which is closely linked to its genuine spirit (Halba, 2012). Present learners may become future assessors and vice versa. This is also part of the empowerment process: changing our perspectives and being able to play a different role. It is not enough to open a door: opening spirits may be the alternative term for enhancing a meaningful and sustainable validation of the competences.

3) Feedback received from migrants as potential VPL candidates

As a result of the workshops offered by the Institute for Research and Information on Volunteering – iriv (French partner of the ALLinHE), at the Cité des Métiers in Paris (October 2012- December 2013), we could have feedback from the migrants themselves. After presenting the profiles of the participants, we will explain the reasons why they attended the workshop and the weaknesses/strengths of a VPL according to their situation (more details in the annex).

The number of participants was 48 (100%): 17 men (35%) and 31 women (65%). They could attend one, two or three workshops. In the beginning, two workshops were proposed: the first one focussed on the Migrapass portfolio (to explain the tool to be used for the VPL), the second one was dedicated to the ALLinHE (the steps to be followed in a VPL in France, information on the national framework on a macro-level and on the organisations to be contacted on a meso-level).

The nationals (French people) were mostly people working with migrants (professionals) or individuals willing to support migrants (friends or colleagues); they represent 20% of the total. The other participants came mainly from:

- Central and South-America : Colombia, 25% ; Mexique, 14.5% ; Haïti, 4% ; Bolivie, 4%, Chili, 2%.
- Europe: Portugal (6%), Romania (2%), Italy (2%) and Serbia (2%).
- Africa: Somalia (4%); Algérie (4%); Syrie (2%) Mali (2%) and Sénégal (2%).

The information for the workshop was mainly disseminated through the network of the Union of Latin associations in France which explains the numerous Latin American participants. The other participants were mainly addressed by councillors at the Cité des Métiers.

The main reasons for attending the workshops were:

- valuing a foreign diploma (28%) ;
- valuing one’s competences (17%),
- working with migrants (13%),
- looking for a job and willing to identify competences (17%),
- valuing a migratory experience (11%),
- willing to have access to a French diploma (4%).
The main weaknesses to start a VPL process among migrants were:

- Many participants did not know the existence of the VPL process or if they had heard of it thought it addressed only nationals
- The access seems to be very selective, especially it is very hard to understand the different steps to be followed: first identification of the diploma/certification available for a VPL in the National repertory for professional certification (RNCP);
- The process appears to be long, risky and uncertain; a traditional course (vocational training proposing a diploma/certification) is easier to understand;
- The question of the same recognition of a diploma/certification obtained thanks to a VPL compare to the one passed thanks to a “traditional course” was raised;
- Poorly qualified migrants were faced with special difficulties relating to collection of all the information required to justify their experience (contracts, attestations…) or a level of competence (diploma, certification…); this was not the case for qualified migrants who were used to the process;
- Poorly qualified migrants were faced with difficulties relating to filling out the written documents required by the VPL process (the same for the portfolio);
- The VPL process requires a good level of linguistic competence, especially a written level of French;
- Even among highly qualified migrants, the portfolio approach was not familiar and had to be explained carefully.

The main strengths in favour of a VPL process among migrants:

- Being able to speak the language of competences; the proposed 12 competences in the Migrapass portfolio can be enriched either by the competences described in the ROME (repertory of employments & trades published by the National Agency for Employment) or by the description of the diploma/certification in the RNCP
- Having a basis to identify an experience and to express it in terms of competences (thanks to the portfolio approach); the process is a good exercise to prepare for a professional interview;
- Being able to find in the National repertory for professional certification (RNCP) a diploma/certification in connection with the diploma/certification obtained in their country of origin;
- Being aware that professional support could be provided to assist them in the VPL process to better understand the requirements;
- The tool - the portfolio - could be used as a pedagogical tool among migrants with a basic level of French; it was a good exercise in speaking “professional French”;
- For many participants, whatever the level of qualification, low or high, the requirements of the portfolio (synthesis of the experiences) was also a good exercise to prepare them for an interview (being able to make a short presentation, being able to bring any relevant document to justify their statement…).

The experimentation implemented at the Cité des Métiers (October 2012 to December 2013, i.e 14 months) was too short to know how many participants were convinced of the usefulness of the VPL process. The positive feedback concerned mainly the method used (the portfolio approach) and a better knowledge of the competences.

It is too soon to know if the ALLinHE project will have an impact on the number of migrants involved in a VPL process. However, the positive feedback received was that many participants attended more than two workshops. Some of them decided to come back regularly in order to share information with
others and to explain the new difficulties faced. In this perspective, the workshop offered at the Cité des Métiers has become a club since January 2014.

Among the Cité des Metiers, the connections with other clubs could be implemented: since the beginning with the Club El Taller (offered by the Union of Latin American associations and addressing nationals from Latin American countries), also with the Club Dynamiques Africaines (offered by the GRDR and addressing nationals from African countries). The Club offered by iriv addresses all migrants, whatever their country of origin and whatever the level of qualification.

Conclusion

Validation of competences has been a crucial issue in Europe for the past twelve years. Even though the EU has not yet become "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy" as promised at the Lisbon Council in 2000, many positive elements may be underlined. Considering the underrepresented target groups and untraditional learners, a main added value of the ALLinHE project is to "open doors" and to take into account special profiles and expectations of VPL candidates.

The "open door" strategy is to be understood in many ways. Combining the top-down approach (EU and States providing legislation and financial support for VPL) and the bottom-up approach (individuals and organisations willing to be better supported for the access to Higher Education and proposing tools & methods to do so) may be a challenging one. The several European projects we have presented illustrate this bottom-up strategy. The Vaeb designed a portfolio for volunteers, the Va2el an e-portfolio for local councillors and the Vab an e-portfolio for students to be assessed by University teachers & trainers (UTT). The ALLinHE combined both a multi-targeted VPL model providing diagnostic or personalized, formative and summative approaches for three groups of people with special needs: 50+, migrants and disabled people.

The diversity of the national legislation on VPL, together with the diverse profiles of VPL councillors and various expectations of VPL candidates are main issues to be taken into consideration if we really want to promote an “open door” approach. At any level many obstacles may be raised. On a macro-level, there might be a misunderstanding on the VPL framework combined with difficulty accessing VPL information. On a meso-level, professionals working with people with special needs (50+, migrants, disabled people) are most of the time not connected with VPL councillors. This lack of connection might be a main obstacle to making VPL accessible. On a micro-level, people with special needs are not properly informed according to their testimonies: the information exists but they do not feel the VPL device is of value to them because they think they are too old (50+), other devices are offered to them (disabled people) or they thought the VPL process was designed for nationals (migrants).

Equality of opportunity to have access to VPL, whatever one’s age, profile, professional or social background could be a challenging goal, in Europe, for the decade to come. There are many ways to overcome this challenge. Involving the actors at all levels (macro, meso and micro levels) is a main issue. Enhancing transparency is another crucial issue as information seem to be differently understood depending on who is explaining the VPL process: institutional speech focussed on the general framework (general principle) on a macro-level, technical speech focussed on the different steps to go through (process) on a meso-level, personal speech focused on the many barriers to overcome (sometimes disappointment compared to the original hope) on a micro-level.

VPL remains an on-going process. The feedback from many individuals having been through the process with their expectations, deceptions or positive achievements is not known nor scientifically analysed. It would be most valuable to focus on testimonies of VPL candidates who succeeded in the process and became themselves VPL councillors. In the same spirit, how far do the policy makers take into account the feedback from those on the ground: not through organisations in charge of VPL
but directly from the candidates themselves? Does there exist a data bank of VPL candidates explaining the reasons for their success or their failure? This might be the story to be written for the 10 years to come. VPL: to be continued.

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Annex – workshops held by iriv at the Cité des Métiers in Paris

Table 1: Participants according to gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MEN</th>
<th>WOMEN</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>48</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentages</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>100%</td>
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Tableau 2: Participants according to countries of origin

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<th>Country</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
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<tr>
<td>France</td>
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<td>Colombia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14.58</td>
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<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haïti</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
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<td>2.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senegal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>100.00</td>
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Tableau 4 : Participants according to reason for attending.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Willing to value a foreign diploma</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>28,26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willing to value one’s competences</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17,39</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working with migrant audiences</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13,04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking for a job</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17,39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double courses</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8,70</td>
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<tr>
<td>Councilling on a migratory experience</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10,87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested by the VPL</td>
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<td>4,35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>100,00</td>
</tr>
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</table>