



Policy Analysis and Recommendations: the VINCE contribution to a more integrated Europe through validation

BACKGROUND

The number of refugees and migrants who reach Europe, escaping from wars or critical life conditions and looking for new life opportunities, has increased dramatically in recent years. These newcomers face many challenges in settling into Europe, and among these are the obstacles to continuing their studies or accessing the labour market.

Newcomers are often prevented from enjoying their rights by many legal and practical barriers. This also represents an obstacle to their integration in hosting societies. One of the main challenges newcomers face is that, although they are frequently educated and skilled, their competences may not be recognised in the host society. Sometimes they reach their destination without official documentation that would prove their education level in their countries of origin. Other times language or cultural barriers prevent their integration. Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNIL) could be a solution for newcomers.

However, there is a lot to be done in order to adapt the current European VNIL procedures to the reality of these individuals.

VINCE wants to contribute to the development of policies in that direction, so that newcomers have the chance to become full members of our society.



RECOMMENDATIONS

	Policy makers level	HEIs/VET and VNIL professionals level	Newcomers level
Communicate	✓	✓	✓
Engage	✓	✓	
Be flexible	✓	✓	
Train	✓	✓	
Speed up	✓		
Reflect and self-assess		✓	
Monitor	✓	✓	
Build community		✓	✓

Table 1: Summary table pointing out which levels would value more each recommendation.

1. **Communicate** *actively to inform newcomers of VNIL possibilities and the potential impact of undertaking this path on their career and their life.* VNIL is a tool well known in Europe. All the EU Member States, for example, have implemented validation policies at national level already. The European Commission is recommending to adopt VNIL in all national education systems because it is a way of giving a second chance to citizens and to highlight their achievements in a formal way. However, we often forget that for those coming from outside Europe this tool, the procedure and benefits may be unknown. This first recommendation encourages (a) policy makers to build in their legal protocols information systems that inform newcomers about the possibility of validation of prior learning routes, through police offices, consulates and embassies and other official points as well as through NGOs and associations working directly with newcomers; (b) HEIs to promote their VNIL opportunities through the careers guidance centres, students' unions and other central offices that newcomers are likely to approach in their institution; (c) newcomers who have been through a VNIL processes to explain their experience to their peers. **The final objective is to give visibility to VNIL opportunities and enable potential users to be informed about them.**
2. **Engage** *decision makers (both at public and private sectors) to commit and to invest in the process of VNIL for newcomers in order to enable their faster integration and increase their self-esteem.* Although VNIL is mostly regulated and available in Europe, there is still a lot to be done in order to offer validation opportunities to newcomers. This might be an opportunity for Europe because it would mean that newcomers would be equipped and ready to work and integrate into our society faster. Legislation should cover the possibility to facilitate VNIL processes to newcomers from the day of their arrival. The need of caring for newcomers in European countries would be reduced if we offer them the possibility to integrate, work and contribute in the welcoming country. **The final objective is to engage all decision-makers concerned to bring about measures that can facilitate the implementation of VNIL processes for newcomers.**

3. **Be flexible** *to make the process adaptable to real constraints such as lack of documents, language and cultural barriers, etc.* Quality is a characteristic pursued by any successful European HEI. Processes and results are expected to preserve the higher quality possible for the reputation of the institution and the benefit of the learners. Sometimes flexibility is perceived as lack of quality. However, this is not necessarily true. Validation processes can help identifying the acquired knowledge and experience of newcomers and put these in value, even when official proof is missing or cultural and language barriers are encountered. **The final objective is to understand the barriers that standard VNIL processes mean for some candidates and to find alternative ways to achieve their validation processes.**
4. **Train professionals** *to deal with “unusual” candidates.* The VNIL schemes have been adopted by many HEIs but without planning adequate training and support for their staff. HEIs have learned how to improve these processes as they were implementing them and have become experts in the field. The arrival of newcomers and their particular needs and challenges have meant additional complications for our professionals. Europe should aim to equip VNIL professionals in a way that they can understand the difficulties and barriers implied by a standard validation process for newcomers and be ready to adapt to each individual’s situation. **The final objective is to have VNIL professionals that have tools and resources to deal with any type of candidate, whatever his/her background and situation might be.**
5. **Speed up processes for newcomers** – *make sure they can become active members of the society as soon as possible.* European countries have put in place standards to deal with newcomers and their integration in society. However, the legal framework is in general very strict and forces newcomers to wait for months before they can even start considering what to do in the welcoming country. Indeed, VNIL processes are very time consuming. Thus, newcomers first have to wait in order to fulfil the legal timings and then initiate VNIL processes that take very long too. **The final objective is to modify the legal framework so that newcomers can start their VNIL processes immediately on arrival and speed up their process of finding a job and integrating into society.**
6. **Reflect and self-assess** *to estimate how the VNIL processes are improving or how to make them improve.* HEIs and VNIL professionals should monitor their own performance, set improving targets and follow up their progress. They should keep records of what has worked well in some cases and what has proved not to be a good approach in others, in order to make future validation processes a successful practice. **The final objective is to refine the knowledge and strategies used in the validation process in order to make them a successful and stress-free experience for the newcomer candidates and also the VNIL professionals.**
7. **Monitor success, progress and needs** *at institutional level but also at national level.* In its 2016 report¹, CEDEFOP showed that VNIL measures and their results have not been monitored thoroughly nor evenly in all countries and, therefore, there is no official data that determines its results and success rate compared to traditional routes. When we talk about newcomers and their full settlement in Europe, it would be useful to know if the VNIL processes help them, in

¹ http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/4148_

which way and if validation as it is currently done is enough or should be improved or changed. The final objective is to assess the VNIL success and usefulness rates to improve the process and make it more effective for newcomers.

- 8. Build community** *to allow VNIL professionals and candidates to share experiences and help each other.* Validation never happens in vacuum and it is therefore necessary to build cross-sectoral awareness about its benefits and positive impact. Additionally, HE staff involved in validation do not always communicate with stakeholders working in the area of integration such as social services, NGOs, law enforcement entities. Building a community where VNIL professionals can interact with other stakeholders and share practices is a key self-training tool. Successful candidates should be active subjects in this community, to explain and advocate for this type of processes. The final objective is to give VNIL professionals a tool that allows them to exchange knowledge and become better prepared professionals.

CONCLUSIONS

The ultimate objectives of VNIL processes for newcomers are (a) to give to these individuals a chance to integrate in our society, (b) to speed up processes and (c) to prepare VNIL professionals to address new challenges and unknown situations.

The understanding of these points and the agreement on their importance by policy makers at European, national and institutional levels, is key to their effective implementation. A strong and consisting lobby is needed top-down in this sense. But an equally powerful advocacy is essential bottom-up through NGOs and organisations that in most of the countries are facilitating reception and orientation for newcomers.

Social investments into sustainable structures are necessary through both EU and national budgets. The training of professionals from HEIs as well as social workers attending migrants is key to enabling newcomers to enter our HE systems as well as promoting their personal development and integration.

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Publisher: [eucen](http://www.eucen.eu), Barcelona, Spain, 2019, <http://www.eucen.eu>

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Design and layout: Jordi Sanchez, Carme Royo

Citation: Royo, C., Uras, F. on behalf of the VINCE consortium (Ed.) (2019): *Policy Analysis and Recommendations: the VINCE contribution to a more integrated Europe through validation*. ISSN: 2664-4789.

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VINCE (580329-EPP-1-2016-1-BE-EPPKA3-IPI-SOC-IN) is a project co-funded by the EC.