

TOOLS THAT HELP MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE LIVES OF PEOPLE – THE VINCE PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION

Europe has seen in recent years how the number of newcomers and refugees who want to settle in our countries has increased. These individuals, generally escaping from wars or critical life conditions, are looking for a new life and opportunities for themselves and their families. Amongst the numerous challenges that they face, the lack of credentials and legal permissions to stay in Europe, make their access to labour market or the possibility to continue studying almost impossible. As a consequence, their integration into the hosting societies slows down and creates dissatisfaction and frustration both for the newcomers and for the European nationals (who might perceive the newcomers as a burden - see *Figure 1* below). Although newcomers are often educated and skilled, their competences may not be recognised in the host society either because their documents are missing or because their national qualifications are not totally comparable to those awarded in Europe.

Taking this real situation into consideration and knowing that the newcomers will have to be helped at some point by European professionals until they find a suitable job or career path, the VINCE project aimed to give to higher education (HE) staff - especially those professionals working in the validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNIL) - a set of tools to deal with the extra difficulties of assessing migrants and refugees enrolled as candidates in a validation processes in Europe.

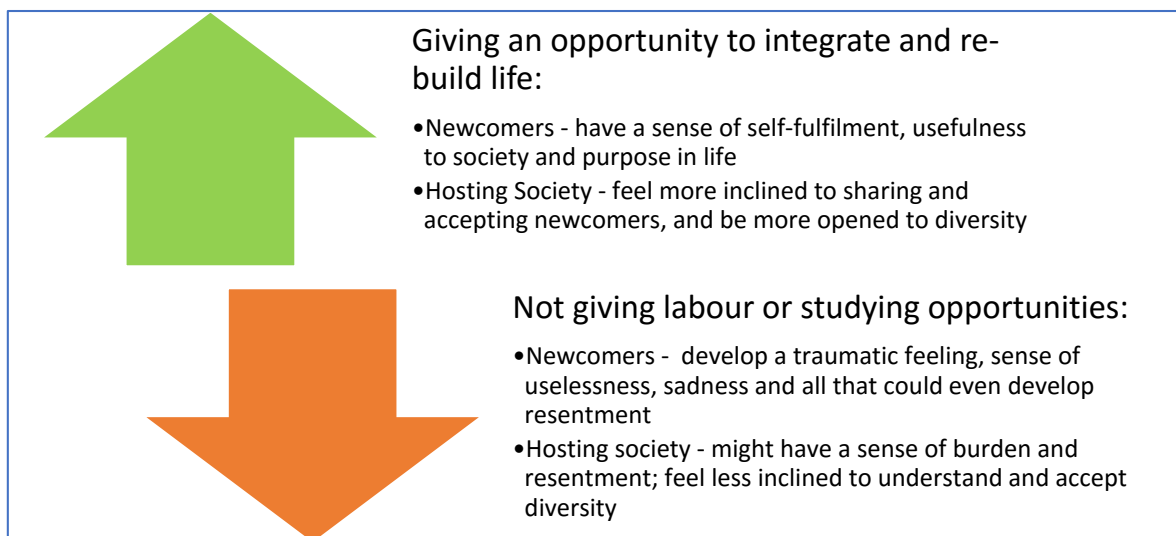


Figure 1 Giving or not opportunities affects newcomers and European citizens. C Royo, eucen, 2019.

The VINCE project, funded under the Key Activity 3 funding programme “Support for Policy Reform – Social inclusion through Education, Training and Youth” (Call EACEA-05-2016), run for three years and was integrated by 13 partners from 11 different European countries. The consortium included NGOs, Associations, HEIs and VET providers.

WHY IS 'VALIDATION OF NON FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING' AN INTEGRATING TOOL?

VNIL is a powerful tool for social inclusion that gives a second chance to individuals. This alternative route into higher education could help those who have been denied the opportunity to enter further studies for a variety of social, political, legal or economic reasons, or those who have had to stop their studies and abandon their homes/countries. The VNIL processes ensure that candidates are recognised for what they have learned during their working life or, their life experiences more generally. It helps candidates to identify, analyse and evaluate what they have learned from experience, relate it to formal studies and construct a claim to have their acquired knowledge recognised. In summary, VNIL is about being fair and giving credit to an individual's self-growth regardless of the candidate's origin or background.

VINCE shows how the VNIL can be used and can be useful as well, enhancing relations between HEIs and newcomers particularly, and increasing trust between the staff from HEIs in general and these new arrivals who know little or nothing about the education system in their hosting country and/or the institution that accepts to recognise their previous studies or skills. In addition, the individualised processes of VNIL is ideal for newcomers, allowing them to receive the attention and help they need.

VINCE has generated a transfer of knowledge about Europe, the welcoming country, the education system and the specific institution dealing with the new arrivals, and has brought an improved reflection among the members of staff of HEIs using the project outputs about the situation and feelings of displaced people.

The VINCE products can make newcomers better understood and helped. The final objective is to give tools to the EU countries' professionals to understand the skills and knowledge of new arrivals so newcomers are equipped with at least the basic validation that allows them to enter the working environment and feel better integrated and more useful to their families and to the arrival country. Our professionals, therefore, must be recognised for their work - their existing skills and experience should be acknowledged but they need to be helped to prepare themselves properly for "different" types of VNIL candidates, so training is imperative.

Formal legislation and regulations at European, national and institutional levels should be enabled, especially if a system of validation is expected to be harmonised throughout Europe.

LEARNING FROM THE IMPACT OF VALIDATION IN THE NEWCOMERS' LIFE

VINCE has collected a number of testimonies from students who had undergone (or were in the process of completing) a validation process. The two testimonials below are a small sample that show how validation/recognition processes can change the newcomers' life¹:

- a) *Before I was constantly wondering if I was as valuable in Norway as I was in Iraq. The thought of going back to my homeland was always present. I applied for all kinds of jobs, from garbage collector to social worker. I wrote about 400 work applications without receiving a proper answer. When I thought about studying, I thought that I would have to start from scratch, and I did not want to say aloud that I had an education.*

¹ Real testimonials collected by NOKUT.

Now I feel that I am as valuable as before [in Iraq], and that Norway appreciates my background and effort. Now I do not think about going back home, I am happy about my work, and the future of my daughter is omnipresent. After receiving my recognition I chose only to apply for relevant jobs, I only wrote about 10 work applications, and was called in for four job interviews. I actually had to turn down two job offers! Now when I am thinking about studying I am only thinking about doing a Master's degree. Moreover, most importantly of all, I can shout out that I do have an education! The Norwegian Directorate for Immigration gave me as a refugee a future in Norway, and the recognition from NOKUT gave me my past back in order to have a better future.

- b) *These documents [the recognition certificates] are my securities. They show that I am a good person who has studied, and a person who wants to work and contribute to the society. You need to have an evidence of that, and these documents are my evidence. This gives me the opportunity to continue studying. It states among other things where I did my previous studies. My greatest hope for the future is to be well integrated into the Norwegian society. I owe Norway so much for choosing me as a quota refugee. When you receive an opportunity like the one we have received, you have to show that you are able to work hard and do your best.*

METHODOLOGY OF WORK USED IN VINCE

Apart from the transversal work, the project can be divided in 4 different phases as shown in *Figure 2*, which include empirical work, desk research, interviews and extensive peer learning sessions.

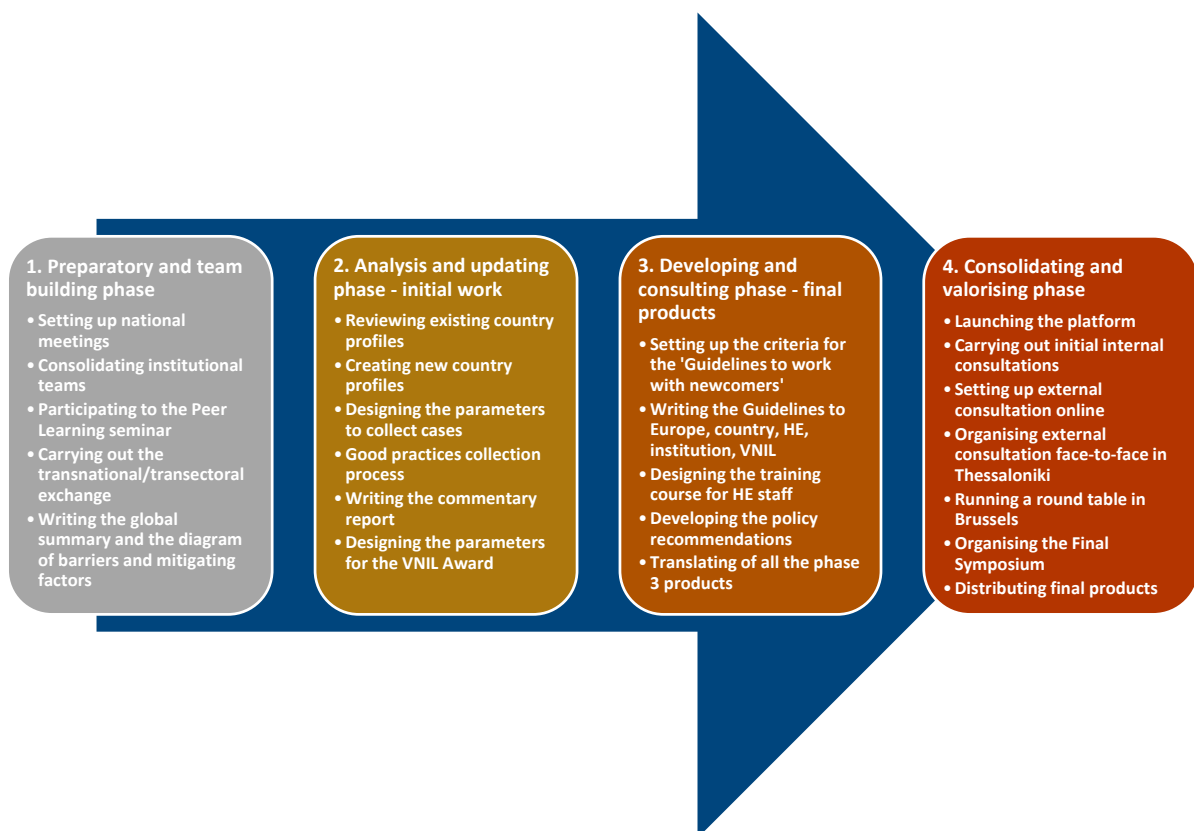


Figure 2 Working phases of VINCE. C Royo, eucen, 2019.

TOOLS TO HELP HIGHER EDUCATION STAFF TO UNDERSTAND NEWCOMERS AND DO BETTER VALIDATION PROCESSES WITH THEM

VINCE has developed six main outputs:

Interactive Platform

The VINCE platform is addressed to validation professionals who can use it as a source of resources. Newly arrived migrants and refugees might find it useful to know more about the process of validation. The platform is available in EN, FR and DE <https://vince.eucen.eu>

Country profiles

VINCE has revised and updated the country factsheets developed by eucen's project OBSERVAL-Net² into a new set of 33 country/region profiles illustrating how VNIL practice and procedures in HE are implemented all over Europe. The new country profiles can be accessed from the interactive platform <https://vince.eucen.eu/validation-in-europe/>

Case studies of validation practices

VINCE has collected 68 cases in total (58 collected by the consortium and 10 accepted as cases for the VINCE VNIL Award 2019). These documents illustrate experiences of validation professionals and refugees regarding validation and recognition procedures. They are accompanied by a Commentary Report which summarises the main features of the collection and draws key conclusions and recommendations. All the cases can be accessed from the library at the interactive platform <https://vince.eucen.eu/vince-case-studies/>

Guidelines for Higher Education staff to help migrants and refugees

The VINCE guidelines are templates for HEIs, containing frequently asked questions (FAQs) from refugees and migrants concerning 5 different areas (Welcome to Europe, Welcome to this Country, Welcome to Higher Education in Europe, Welcome to this Institution, Welcome to Validation). HE professionals can use the templates and adapt them based on their country's and/or institution's specifications/needs. The templates are available at the interactive platform in EN, DE, DK, ES, GR, FR, IT, NL, NO, SI, HU and can be downloaded for direct use or adaptation <https://vince.eucen.eu/guidelines/>

Prototype Training Course for Higher Education staff to help migrants and refugees

VINCE has developed a generic Professional Development Course (CPDC) which aims to provide the reader with insights and ideas for developing staff training for validation professionals who work with candidates from other countries during their adaptation processes to our society. It contains references to the other tools developed by VINCE and examples taken from the case studies' collection. The prototype is available at the interactive platform and is available in EN, FR, DE, DK <https://vince.eucen.eu/vince-training-course/>

Policy Recommendations

The VINCE recommendations propose ways to deal with the recognition of the skills of newcomers. The document is addressed to policy makers, HEIs/VET institutions and newcomers in Europe. This document is available from the interactive platform in three languages: EN, FR, DE <https://vince.eucen.eu/policy-recommendations/>

² <http://observal-net.eucen.eu>

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO PLAN FOR A VALIDATING EUROPE

The policy work carried out during the project (including public online and face-to-face consultations with external stakeholders) confirmed the appropriateness of the 8 priorities of validation of non-formal and informal learning identified by VINCE. *Figure 3* below shows a summary table pointing out which levels (i.e. policy makers, VNIL professionals or newcomers) would value more each of the recommendations:

VINCE IDENTIFIED PRIORITIES	Policy makers level	HEIs-VET VNIL professionals level	Newcomers level
1. Communicate / Reach out to inform newcomers about VNIL and encourage its use	✓	✓	✓
2. Engage decision makers to commit and invest in VNIL for newcomers faster integration	✓	✓	
3. Be flexible to make the process adaptable to cultural, language and other constraints	✓	✓	
4. Train the professionals to deal with “unusual” candidates and give them useful tools	✓	✓	
5. Speed up the processes for newcomers to make them active members of society	✓		
6. Reflect and self-assess to estimate how VNIL can be improved. Refine processes		✓	
7. Monitor success, progress and further needs of VNIL transnational. Compare results	✓	✓	
8. Build community to allow sharing of experiences, tools and knowledge and to allow helping each other		✓	✓

Figure 3 Table extracted and expanded from the full VINCE Policy Recommendations paper³

The VINCE policy recommendations are meant to reach policy makers, especially in an attempt to make an impact on European policies. The recommendations are very focused on the eight priorities, the key elements to be addressed, and shows why each element is important and which is the final objective of each recommendation.

The VINCE policy recommendations paper has been prepared in a generic way, in order to allow potential users to adapt to their national context and needs. The interactive platform offers open access to the full paper in different languages.

³ C Royo, F Uras (eucen) 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 <https://vince.eucen.eu/policy-recommendations/>

CONCLUSIONS

The efficient integration of newcomers within their European hosting countries is a key element to making our society more balanced, fair and sustainable. The validation of newcomers' qualifications and skills enable refugees and migrants to access the labour market or pursue further studies as quickly as possible after their arrival, thus giving them a sense of purpose and more dignity, and at the same time liberating the hosting country from special social care that otherwise newcomers will need.

In this sense, higher education institutions can help by informing newcomers about the opportunities that validation offers and by providing the tools and training to validation professionals to address the specific needs of newcomers who decide to start their validation process.

Decision-makers, however, are ultimately responsible for embedding and validating measures in national regulations that enable the implementation of VNIL processes for newcomers and give enough visibility to the VNIL opportunities. These actions would encourage (a) institutions to invest in the staff involved in this area and (b) individuals to opt for VNIL route as an option for their career.

REFERENCES

VINCE interactive platform <https://vince.eucen.eu>

VINCE country profiles <https://vince.eucen.eu/validation-in-europe/>

VINCE collected case studies <https://vince.eucen.eu/vince-case-studies/>

VINCE guidelines <https://vince.eucen.eu/guidelines/>

VINCE training course <https://vince.eucen.eu/training/>

VINCE policy recommendations <https://vince.eucen.eu/policy-recommendations/>

C Royo, F Uras (eucen) 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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