

## THE CHALLENGE FOR MIGRANTS - HELPING NEWCOMERS DEMONSTRATE THEIR KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS IN A NEW COUNTRY

Carme ROYO, eucen, Belgium

### ABSTRACT

The flow of new migrants and refugees reaching Europe is likely to continue in the coming years. The EC recognises that education plays a crucial role in helping migrants and refugees settle in new countries and environments. From language learning to the recognition of qualifications, education is part of the integration and inclusion process. The newcomers face many challenges, including obstacles in accessing the labour market and in continuing their studies, frequently because their competences are not easily recognised in the host society (their skills and knowledge may not fit into predefined bureaucratic policies and procedures; perhaps documentation is lacking or incomplete; or the curriculum they followed does not match certification structures in the host country).

The VINCE project <sup>1</sup> is developing university staff training in Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) <sup>2</sup>, adapting existing proven VPL methods to meet the specific needs of newcomers so that they can access Higher Education (HE) and more easily integrate into European society. The process includes the design of a generic set of guidelines, containing fundamental information on the culture and expectations of Europe, the host country, HE in general, the HE institution in particular, and the VPL arrangements. These guidelines will represent a key tool in designing the training course for HE teachers, validators, advisors and administrators.

The adapted VPL procedures will be trialled with candidates who are newcomers. NGOs will be actively involved in the processes, as full or associate partners, to ensure that the target users and the ultimate beneficiaries are reached at grassroots level and that their interests are represented in all the project phases. The outputs of the project will form the basis of policy recommendations targeted at decision makers at EU, national and institutional levels.

### Key words

Informal learning, inclusion, integration, learning outcomes, migrants, non-formal learning, prior learning, recognition, refugees, RPL, validation, VNIL, VPL.

### BACKGROUND AND INITIAL WORK

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, and the flow is likely to continue in future years. These newcomers face many challenges in settling in Europe. Among the obstacles they encounter are difficulties in accessing the labour market and / or continuing their studies. Migrants and refugees are in practice often prevented from enjoying their rights by many legal and practical barriers. This also presents an obstacle to their full integration into hosting societies. One of the main challenges newcomers and refugees face is that although they are often educated and skilled, their competences may not be recognised in the host society.

---

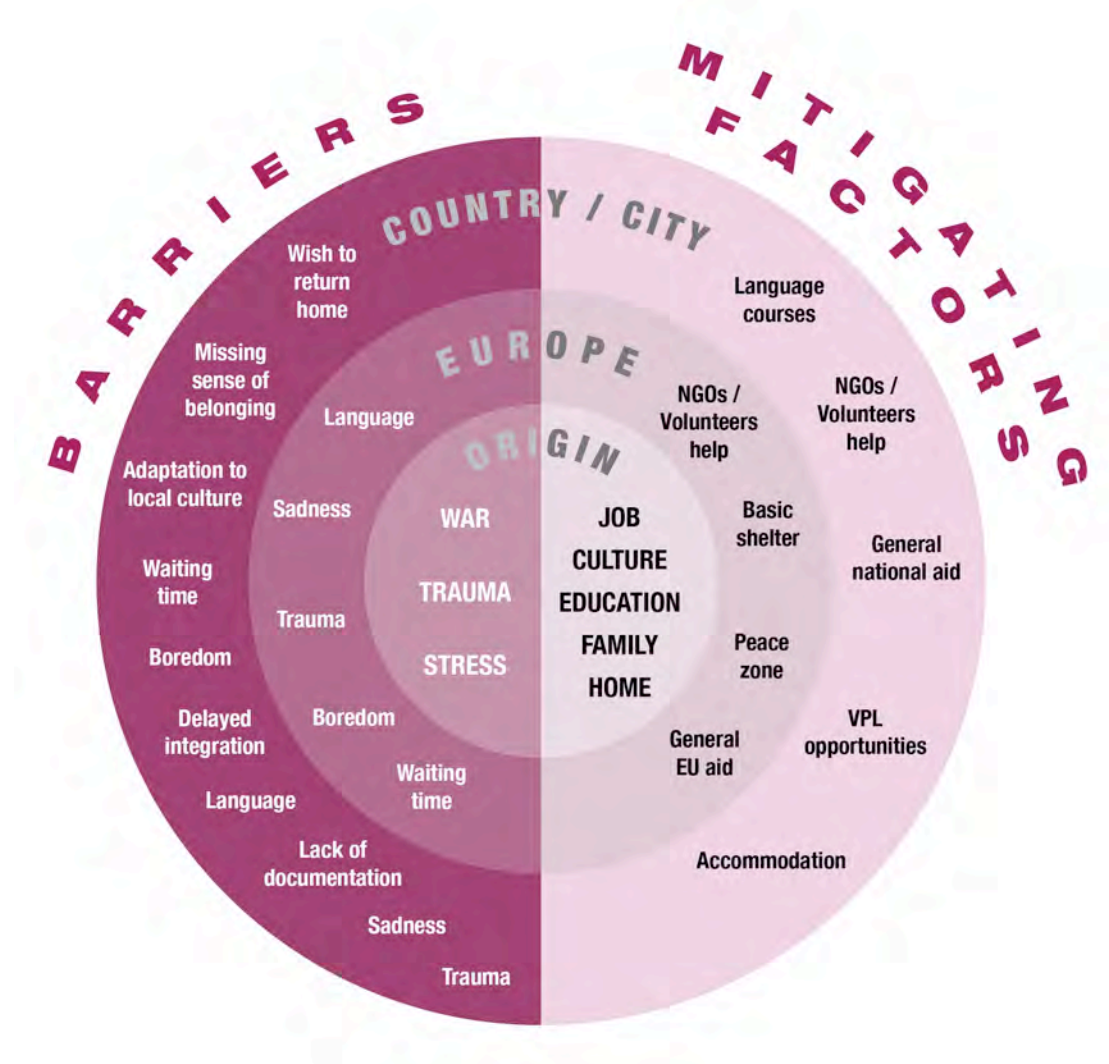
<sup>1</sup> <http://vince.eucen.eu>

<sup>2</sup> This term varies from country to country. It is also known as or Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNIL) or Recognition of prior learning (RPL), for example. VPL has been used throughout this paper as acronym for all these concepts.

Sometimes they reach their destination without documentation that would prove the educational level they had attained in their countries of origin.

With these ideas in mind and wishing to facilitate the integration and the inclusion of newcomers in our societies, eucen decided to develop a project that would give tools to the VPL professionals working with the extra difficulties of assessing migrant and refugee cases for validation. The tools that VINCE is developing will help HE staff understand the newcomers' situation, the type of issues that concern them, and, in summary, the kind of help that they need.

In a first phase of the project, the consortium organised a Peer Learning Seminar where all partners presented their experience working with refugees and migrants, and summarised the challenges that working with newcomers represents. The experiences presented show many similarities, even when the cases were about newcomers arriving from different countries of origin and to different countries of Europe. The coincidences highlighted during the seminar helped to identify the barriers and mitigating factors for the integration and inclusion of migrants and refugees in European welcoming countries. These factors were plotted in Diagram 1 (see below). The barriers and mitigating factors appeared at 3 different levels: at origin, on arrival in Europe and in the welcoming country (or final destination).



**Diagram 1:** Barriers and mitigating factors for integration and inclusion of migrants and refugees in European welcoming countries.  
C Royo (eucen) 2017, for the VINCE project.

## TOOLS ALREADY COMPLETED AND READY FOR USE, AND FORTHCOMING WORK

All these common key facts and issues identified during the first phase of the project have been the basis for the development of a VINCE set of guidelines for VPL professionals. These guidelines are basic tools for VPL professionals to use in their day to day work when helping newcomers through the processes of validation. A list of questions and issues of interest commonly raised by newcomers has been identified, allowing VPL professionals to be better prepared and equipped when helping newcomers. The guidelines are structured in five different levels:

- Welcome to Europe
- Welcome to Higher Education
- Welcome to this Country
- Welcome to this Institution
- Welcome to Validation (migrants and refugees often do not know that validation exists, what it is exactly and how it can be of help to them)

The guidelines have been developed in the form of frequently asked questions (FAQs) and are already available on the VINCE platform. The template relevant to these five guidelines are also available in the project's platform in both PDF and Word formats so that other VPL professionals can download them and adapt them (or translate them) to their own needs.

The VINCE platform is intended to be a convergence point for VPL professionals working with newcomers - a space to discuss, exchange and share points of view on common situations and issues, allowing VPL professionals to help each other and to find possible solutions to similar problems.

Included in the VINCE platform is a reviewed and updated set of country profiles developed by the OBSERVAL-Net project<sup>3</sup> that explains the framework for VPL activities in 33 different European countries. In addition, there is also a profile for Europe in general. Also integrated in the platform is the OBSERVAL-Net repository of materials which offers further models of good practice to those VPL professionals that browse the contents. The VINCE platform will, therefore, become with all these materials a source of resources and best practice for VPL professionals.

The project is now developing a short prototype course to train VPL professionals - although they are already prepared to undertake validation processes in general, VPL professionals might not be aware of the peculiarities of working with refugees and migrants. Some generic training will help them reflect on the particularities of this kind of validation processes (i.e. what is the mental state of newcomers when they arrive in our countries? what are their worries or fears? what are their needs?). It will help them also to be resourceful and more flexible and to be prepared to deal with challenging situations, such as language barriers.

The next step in the project will be to write a set of policy recommendations for policy makers - the current migration flows to Europe require us to address the needs not only of the newcomers but also of those receiving and attending the newcomers. This situation has to be brought to the attention of policy makers so that they understand the type of new citizens that arrive in our countries and their needs, as well as the training needs of our professionals working with these new arrivals. The objective of the VINCE policy paper is to influence policy makers so that, on the one hand, they make special provision to improve the newcomers' situation, and, on the other hand, appropriate training and periodical reassurance is provided for the professionals addressing the newcomers' needs.

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.observal-net.org>

## VINCE AS A VEHICLE FOR PROFESSIONAL TRANSITIONS

Europe is facing a challenge: the flow of migrants and refugees has increased in recent years, and it seems that there will be a continued flow (maybe in smaller proportions) in years to come. The newcomers that arrive in our countries face a problem of integration and inclusion which starts with the barriers that they find when trying to find a job or re-start their studies. In many cases, the lack of official documented accreditation of their skills or previous studies is the first barrier which prevents them from proceeding with their new life.

eucen has always believed that VPL is a powerful tool for social inclusion which gives a second chance to individuals. This alternative route into higher education could help candidates without documentation (such as migrants or refugees) to be recognised for what they have learned during their working life or what they have qualified for in their countries of origin. It can help 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. It can also help to compare their formal studies to similar studies in Europe and find a way to fill any gap, thus offering them the possibility to acquire new qualifications recognised in Europe. In summary, it is a tool which has the potential to allow European society be fairer to individuals and give credit to their self-growth.

The VINCE project is an example of how VPL processes can be used and can be useful. The project will enhance relations between HEIs and newcomers particularly, and increase trust between the staff from HEIs in general and these new arrivals who know little or nothing about the education system in their welcoming country and/or the institution that is prepared to recognise their previous studies or skills. The project will generate a transfer of knowledge at different levels (i.e. Europe, the welcoming countries, the education system, the specific institution dealing with the new arrivals, etc.) through the developed guidelines (available in several languages), and bring an improved understanding and reflection among the members of staff of HEIs regarding the situation and feelings of displaced people. Empathy and understanding will evolve to a new level.

The final objective of VINCE is to provide tools for the EU countries to understand the skills and knowledge of new arrivals, so that newcomers are equipped with at least the basic validation that allows them to enter the working environment or HE studies, and feel better integrated and more useful both to their families and to the country in which they have settled. Newcomers can feel prouder and more satisfied with their new life and living conditions and become real citizens of Europe with the same rights and obligations.

All these processes will happen when VPL professionals are properly prepared to deal with the cases of newcomers (unusual in the past). VINCE has enabled a space for discussing and sharing situations and solutions amongst VPL professionals. This space can help VPL professionals to find possible solutions to similar problems and to evolve into better prepared validation professionals.

In summary, the five VINCE sets of guidelines will help in giving adequate advice to newcomers (e.g. about Europe, higher education, their host country, the relevant institution and validation); the generic course to train VPL professionals who work with newcomers will help to prepare these professionals to meet the needs of a different type of candidates; and the policy paper will influence policy makers to make special provision to improve the newcomers' situation and to give training to professionals attending to newcomers' needs. This should cover all the areas which need attention in order to ensure adequate advancement of VPL practices in Europe and, thus, facilitate the smooth professional transitions both of newcomers and also of VPL professionals using the VINCE tools available.

## REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

VINCE *Welcome to Validation. Guidelines*. VINCE consortium. Available online at <http://vince.eucen.eu/guidelines/>

C Royo. *Giving opportunities to migrants and refugees to get into higher education: setting the right context for learning*. Article for EPAL. 2018. <https://ec.europa.eu/epale/en/blog/giving-opportunities-migrants-and-refugees-get-higher-education-setting-right-context-learning>

C Royo. *Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNIL): what, how, where and why*. Invited keynote speaker. 1<sup>st</sup> International Scientific and Practical Conference "Lifelong Learning: Effective Approaches and Outlooks" proceedings, pp 20-30. Moscow, 06-07 April 2018, Moscow City University <https://ino.mgpu.ru/articles/itogi-mezhdunarodnoj-nauchno-prakticheskoy-konferentsii-nepreryvnoe-obrazovanie-effektivnye-praktiki-i-perspektivy-razvitiya/>

Cedefop (2016). *Monitoring the use of validation of non-formal and informal learning. Thematic report for the 2016 update of the European Inventory on validation*. Luxembourg: Publications office <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/4148>

Cedefop 2015: *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning* <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/3073>

BFUG 2015: *The European Higher Education Area in 2015: Bologna Process Implementation Report* [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/eacea-site/files/european\\_higher\\_education\\_area\\_bologna\\_process\\_implementation\\_report.pdf](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/eacea-site/files/european_higher_education_area_bologna_process_implementation_report.pdf)

Cedefop 2014: *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014* <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/fr/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory>

OBSERVAL-Net eBook *Cooperate to Validate*. 2013. [http://www.observal-net.eu/sites/default/files/VNIL\\_Report.pdf](http://www.observal-net.eu/sites/default/files/VNIL_Report.pdf)

OBSERVAL-Net Manifesto. 2013. [http://www.observal-net.eu/sites/default/files/OBS-Net\\_Manifesto\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.observal-net.eu/sites/default/files/OBS-Net_Manifesto_FINAL.pdf)

Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. 20 December 2012 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32012H1222%2801%29>

J-M Filloque. *To understand the French system of APL/RPL*, Invited presentation, 2<sup>nd</sup> international conference "The adaptive functions of lifelong learning in the globalization process". 21-22 April 2011, Kursk institute of management, economics and business, Kursk, 305000, Russia.

Cedefop 2010 : *The 2010 update of the European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning* : <http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2011/77643.pdf>

Cedefop 2009: *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning* <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/5059.aspx>

Cedefop section on VNIL <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning>

Cedefop European inventory on VNIL <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory>