

“I No Longer Feel Like I Can Hardly Do Anything”: Personal and Career Consequences of Validation of Transversal Competences

Steinunn Björk Jónatansdóttir, MSS Lifelong Learning center, Iceland;
Arnheiður Gígja Guðmundsdóttir, Fræðslumiðstöð atvinnulífsins,
Iceland; and Sif Einarsdóttir, University of Iceland - Háskóli Íslands,
Iceland

Abstract

Validation of transversal competences has been offered as part of life-long learning services in Iceland. The aim of this study was to explore the career and personal consequences for people participating in validation of prior learning of transversal competences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants who had completed the validation process. The results revealed increased awareness of what they are capable of, what they had learned in life and work, and how they could use their skills in the labor market. This made participants more hopeful and capable in career planning, thus increasing self-efficacy. A history of failed educational attempts with concomitant discouragement was a common theme in their lives. Therefore, the career guidance counselor played a key role in providing encouragement to complete the process. It can be concluded that validation of transversal skills helps in rewriting more positive career stories.

Validation of transversal competences (needed to participate in the labor market, citizenry, and ongoing learning) is offered in lifelong learning centers in Iceland, intended for people who have not completed an upper secondary education. In Iceland, there has been a focus on validating job- or trade-specific skills as reflected in vocational education curricula to meet the government’s stated policy goal of increasing formal degree completion (Adult Education Act no. 27/2010; CEDEFOP, 2012). Transversal competences, in contrast, are needed in most workplaces, not just for certain jobs (Guðmundsdóttir & Kristinsdóttir, 2014). The few studies that have been conducted in Iceland indicate that validation of prior learning encourages adults to enroll in and complete formal degrees (Indriðadóttir, 2017). Moreover, the validation process seems to strengthen participants’ self-confidence and give them the courage to take the next steps in their careers (Sigurðardóttir, 2010). In other words, increasing people’s awareness of their own capabilities also increases self-efficacy beliefs related to learning and education (Fejes & Anderson, 2009; Kristinsdóttir, 2013).

Compared to curriculum-based validation, the aim of validating transversal competences is less formal and more open. Nevertheless, we expect it helps people gain more awareness of their own capabilities and how they relate to skills commonly

considered important in the labor market, increasing self-confidence and efficacy beliefs in relation to career development. In this study, we, therefore, focus on the career-related and personal consequences of transversal competence validation. The Icelandic Adult Education Act (no. 27/2010) emphasizes the importance of ready access to career guidance and counseling, which have been shown to be key for successfully re-entering the education system (Sigurðardóttir, 2010). Therefore, the role of professional support in the validation of transversal competences will also be explored.

Validation of Transversal Competences

The term *transversal skills* refers to learned competences, attitudes, and behaviors that are needed to participate in the labor market, be an active citizen, and have the capacity for ongoing learning to tackle increasingly demanding tasks (CEDEFOP, 2013; Erasmus, 2017; Guðmundsdóttir & Kristinsdóttir, 2014; Kristinsdóttir, 2019; UNESCO, 2016). Other terms that have been used in the literature for the same concept include *transferable, basic, personal, soft, or employability skills* (CEDEFOP, 2014; Erasmus, 2017). We choose to advocate using the term *transversal competences* because it captures the core meaning of skills needed for almost all jobs (ice: almenn starfshæfni), such as communication, ethics, and critical judgment, while simultaneously better encompassing the complexity of a person's capability (behavior, cognition, attitude) than *skill*, which refers more to concrete behaviors.

Validation of transversal competences is primarily intended to raise participants' awareness of their own capabilities; in other words, it makes explicit what they have previously learned in both formal and informal settings. Second, it helps participants connect their competences to general work requirements as defined by the labor market. Third, such validation facilitates communication among employees, employers, and educational institutions by establishing a common language and understanding.

The Validation of Transversal Skills project was started by the Education and Training Service Center (ETSC) in 2011 using IPA funding (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance) from the European Union. This work follows the trend of identifying common skills needed in the fast-changing labor market (CEDEFOP, 2013) with a focus on the target group for validation as defined by laws and policies in Iceland, i.e., people who have not completed a formal degree beyond compulsory education (Adult Education Act 27/2010). After reviewing various definitions of and methods for categorizing transversal skills, the decision was made to use the framework developed by the Conference Board of Canada (<https://www.conferenceboard.ca>). The competence categories identified there aligned well with common skills needed in the Icelandic labor market that had been discussed in a consultation group with employers. ETSC consulted with another Canada-based organization, the Human Resource System Group (www.hrsg.ca), to adapt these competences to the Icelandic labor market. This work resulted in the identification of 11 transversal competences, which are listed and defined in Table 1 (Guðmundsdóttir and Kristinsdóttir, 2014; Kristinsdóttir, 2019).

Table 1*Eleven Transversal Competences for Validation*

Competence	Definition
Adaptability	Adapting in order to work effectively in ambiguous or changing situations and with diverse individuals and groups.
Resource management	Managing resources (financial, human, physical, and information) to achieve planned goals.
Interactive communication	Listening to others and communicating articulately, fostering open communication.
Valuing cultural diversity	Building on one's own cultural values and knowledge to work effectively with individuals of diverse backgrounds in a variety of work contexts.
Critical judgment	Evaluating ideas and information while referring to objective criteria to reach rational conclusions.
Teamwork	Working collaboratively with others to achieve organizational goals.
Planning and organizing	Developing, implementing, evaluating, and adjusting plans to reach goals, while ensuring the optimal use of resources.
Continuing education	Identifying and addressing learning and developmental needs to enhance own performance.
Information gathering and processing	Locating and collecting data from appropriate sources and analyzing it to prepare meaningful and concise reports that summarize the information.
Work ethics and values	Demonstrating and supporting the organization's ethics and values.
Concern for safety	Identifying hazardous or potentially hazardous situations and taking appropriate action to maintain a safe environment for self and others.

(Kristinsdóttir, 2019, pp. 1-6).

These 11 transversal competences form the foundation for the validation process (Kristinsdóttir, 2019), which consists of both individual and group sessions with qualified career counselors and a formal assessor (Adult Education Act, 27/2010; CEDEFOP, 2012; Regulation on Adult Education, 1163/2011). The participant has the right to career and guidance counseling (Adult Education Act 27/2010). We use the English term "Career and guidance counselor" (CGC) in line with the European NICE terminology (Schiersmann et al., 2016) as roughly equivalent to the Icelandic job title "náms- og starfsráðgjafi," which requires a two-year MA degree for licensing in Iceland (Act on Career Guidance Counselors, no. 35/2009).

Each participant starts the validation process by meeting with a career and guidance counselor for an individual screening interview in which the purpose, basic premises, and possible personal gains are explained. This serves as the foundation for a participatory evaluation as to whether the validation process is suitable for each person. Four group sessions led by the counselor focus on the creation of a competency portfolio, assessment, and tasks related to the 11 defined categories. In the group sessions competence portfolio is created by each person. The career guidance counselors provide support in relating the competences to previous work and life experiences by applying various rating scales. Then based on the information in the portfolio and rating scales, each person estimates their own level of competence for each of the 11 competences found in the Icelandic version of the European Educational Qualification Framework (EQF) (Kristjánsdóttir, 2015; Stjórnarráð Íslands, e.d.). There are four levels of competence, including a basic level and three levels of progressively higher competence. Table 2 gives an example of an evaluation sheet showing different levels of the skill defined as “Adaptability.”

Table 2
Levels of Adaptability for Evaluation by Participants

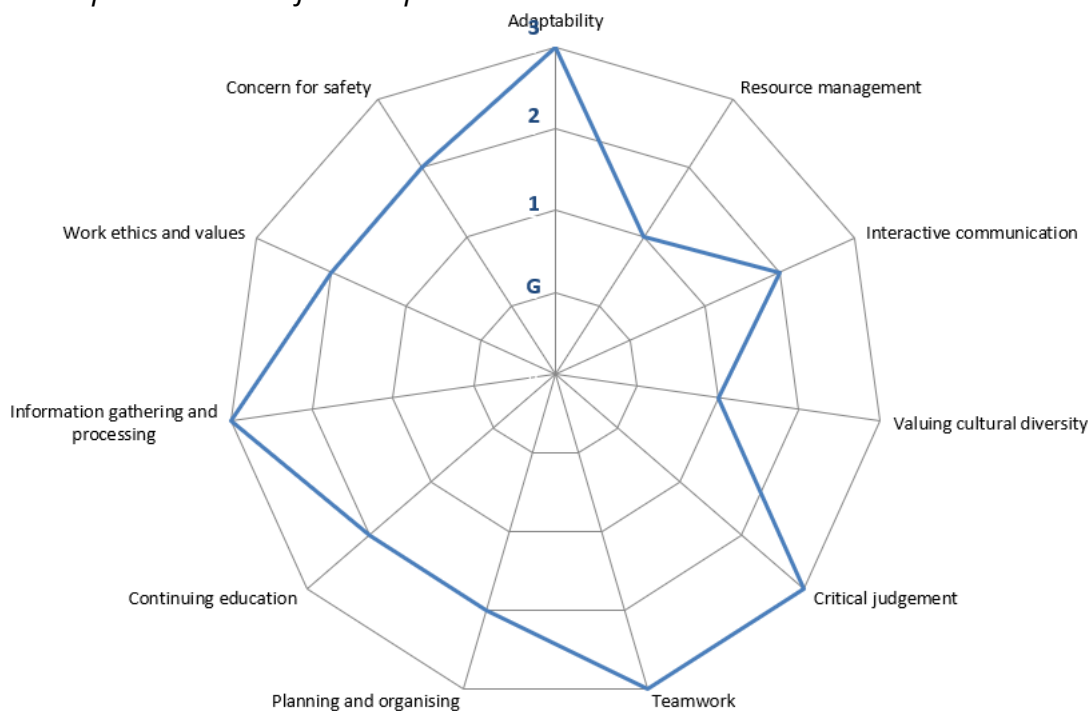
Basic level	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Recognizes the need to adapt	Adapts to the situation	Adapts to widely varied needs	Adapts plans and goals
Expresses willingness to do things differently.	Changes own behavior or approach to suit the situation.	Adapts to new ideas and initiatives across a wide variety of issues or situations.	Adapts organizational or project plans to meet new demands or priorities.
Understands and recognizes the value of the points of view and ways of doing things.	Flexibly applies rules or procedures, while remaining guided by the organization's values.	Supports and adapts to major changes that challenge traditional ways of operating.	Revises project goals when circumstances demand it.
Displays a positive attitude in the face of ambiguity and change.	Adapts behavior to perform effectively under changing or unclear conditions.	Adapts interpersonal style to highly diverse individuals and groups in a range of situations.	Recognizes and responds quickly to shifting opportunities and risks.
		Anticipates change and adapts own plans and priorities accordingly.	

The four group sessions are followed by an individual interview with a professional who acts as a formal evaluator. The participant is accompanied by a career and guidance counselor in the interview. In this formal assessment interview, the evaluator makes the final evaluation of the participant self-assessment focusing on the level of competence. This is done by inquiring the participant about their work history and other experiences. Continuing with the example of adaptability from the list of 11 competences, the

evaluator may ask: Have you in the past needed to learn a new way of doing things from others? Can you give me a concrete example of such an experience? Can you give me an example of how you dealt with recent changes at work or in life? What have others pointed out to you, you might do differently?

After the assessment interview, the evaluator writes up a report and summarizes the assessment results (final level of 11 competences) using a graphical representation as seen in Figure 1. The formal evaluation is always followed by an individual interview with the same career and guidance counselor who led the screening and group sessions. The summarized results are reviewed with the participants. In this final part of the process, participants create personal career plans by identifying their own strengths and challenges. Educational and career opportunities are explored in relation to previous experiences and the evaluation results. The career and guidance counselor provides information, support, and encouragement to help the participant find their own career direction and take the first steps toward their goal.

Figure 1
Visual Representation of Participants' Results



Method

Participants

A purposive sampling strategy (Blöndal & Halldórsdóttir, 2013) was used to recruit participants for the study. Two hundred individuals had undergone validation of transversal competences in five lifelong learning centers across the country between 2015-2020. Participants were recruited through two of these centers requesting those who had completed the validation process between six months and four years earlier if they would be willing to participate. Six people volunteered, four women and two males aged 24-49 (three are not yet 30); all four women have children. Informed consent was obtained; pseudonyms are used in the text. Interestingly, all participants had been

referred to the centers as part of a formal rehabilitation program (under VIRK, a central rehabilitation fund; see virk.is) supporting their return to the labor market after experiencing health problems (Waddell et al., 2008). At the time of the study, four of the participants had begun educational programs, while two were still in rehabilitation. They all had a history of longstanding social and personal problems, including difficult school experiences as children and not having their special needs met. Each one had dropped out of upper secondary education due to various problems, such as learning difficulties (dyslexia, ADHD), bullying, anxiety, depression, or illness in the family. Nevertheless, they valued education and had tried to return to school, albeit unsuccessfully. Their work histories are characterized by discontinuity, with periods of unemployment due to social and personal challenges.

Interviews and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted online (due to both Covid and distance), first asking about the subject's family background, education, and work history, then focusing on their experience of the validation process, both in general and in terms of professional support received, and finally inquiring about their future career plans. Thematic analysis was conducted with the aim of detecting common themes and experiences using the two-stage procedure of initial and focused coding as suggested by Charmaz (2014).

Results

The results show that the participants felt challenged throughout the validation process. Nevertheless, by becoming more aware of their abilities and receiving professional support, they were able to take small but steady steps toward taking charge of their future career plans. The validation process clearly helped them shift their focus away from "weaknesses and past failures" and toward their own capabilities and strengths. However, this was a difficult, gradual process, and support was needed at every step to keep the participants from getting discouraged. In some sense, they managed to start a new chapter in writing and recreating more positive learning history than they had experienced in their youth. Before describing results related to their experiences and the consequences of the validation process, we will now offer a fuller sense of their history.

Difficult Educational Experiences – Broken Spirit

All the participants' stories share a common thread of difficulties in compulsory education and failed attempts to complete upper secondary education. Besides ADHD, Helgi also experienced extensive bullying from his peers. He withdrew into himself, seeking refuge in the world of books. He describes his experience in compulsory education as "pretty much horror for me," especially the bullying, which he describes as follows:

I was constantly picked on and badly bullied... especially the first five years of school, they were... they were seriously hard for me. I had a hard time staying at school. A lot of the time I was just trying to get away from the [other] kids... in the middle of the school day, just go somewhere else, so my elementary school years were horrible for me.

The last year of school, I did go to class for the required core subjects and maybe two other subjects but didn't show my face at school otherwise.

Helgi, who is now middle-aged, says his teachers had tried to help him; they were aware of his struggles, as was his mother, also a teacher. Sigríður also experienced difficult circumstances and lack of support. She had to take care of herself as a child, which she says was a formative experience. When she graduated from compulsory education at 16, she moved away from home due to her mother's illness. As she describes, "I wasn't doing too well in school because I had a sick mother at home and such. She had been ill as long as I could remember." She did not find school or learning difficult, but her home life hindered her studying, and she didn't have much interest in school. Sigríður emphasizes that she had to work a lot in her youth: "Yes, I just needed to work... I had three jobs, in a hotel, in a bakery, and at a convenience store."

Ása's story, while somewhat different, is quite common for women. She went abroad as an exchange student after compulsory education. When she came back, she suffered from anxiety that thwarted her efforts in upper secondary school. She also has ADHD and difficulty concentrating. She left school when she became pregnant. Rannveig was doing well at school, despite moving and changing schools three times during compulsory education (grades 1-10). While in upper secondary school, she lost a close family member, at which time her education was discontinued. "Attempts were made" to get her back in school, as she puts it, but she never regained her academic footing. In most cases, the participants had to contend with circumstances that were not conducive to educational progress. Their families and schools seemed unable to provide the support and resources needed to overcome their challenges. Critical incidents or trauma also seem to have thrown two of the women off track in upper secondary education.

Awareness of Own Capabilities - Foundation for Future

Past school experiences and their influence on a person's self-evaluation are likely to have impacted the career trajectories and quality of life of the people who shared their stories with us. Although the participants found validation of transversal competences quite challenging, their own self-evaluation *did* change during the process. For example, they found it especially hard to identify the connection between their previous work and educational experiences and the level descriptions for each skill on the evaluation sheet (see Table 2). However, when they saw the complete results, the connection and a fuller more positive picture started to fall into place. Rannveig states that she began to see real progress in her rehabilitation after going through the validation of transversal skills. When asked if the process had played a part, she said:

Well, I completed the validation, then I started a short course for office clerks, completed my upper secondary education degree [matriculation exam] through the Lifelong Learning center and the university preparation (bridge) program at a nearby school, and then I started at the university. Hmm... excuse me, I feel very emotional... [holding back tears] Well, yes, the validation was very difficult for me... There were

different parts, and the part where you need to look inward, all this self-exploration was toughest. [Rannveig finds this hard to talk about and takes a short break to collect herself.] Then I saw the results and the results told me... that I was just a better person than I thought, you know, just that. In fact, I had more experience than I had courage to admit, and I had a lot to offer. I did not see that at this point in my life. It just opened so many things for me.

In the final interview with the career guidance counselor, people going through the validation get their results in both written (evaluator's report) and visual formats (Figure 1). At this stage, the results seem to come together holistically and help the participants to see themselves differently, as more capable than before and connect their strengths to new jobs or educational opportunities. Sigríður describes how her own perspective shifted: "I started looking at things differently. It's so important to be able to evaluate your own story, work experiences, and such." The process gave her the strength to take the next step, and she is now enrolled in an educational program.

In fact, four of the six participants are now in education. They managed to find new roles and educational opportunities based on the capabilities they became aware of in the validation of transversal competences. In some cases, the validation process supported ideas they already had, while in other cases, it helped them identify new possibilities. Atli, for example, was already interested in finding a job, but "the validation really showed me where and what kind of job I really wanted to do." Today, Atli is both working and furthering his education. He adds that the validation really changed how he views education.

In her reflections, it is clear that for Rannveig, the validation process gave her the courage to return to an upper secondary program. The results helped her see the big picture and realize what she was capable of. After years of working, it was like a "chain reaction started," and she is now in university: "I had the preconception that validation was only for people like carpenters and such in the skilled trades that needed educational credentials. The validation showed me that I approach tasks differently than others... Well, I've been working for a long time, so maybe I see things differently now than I would have when I was twenty years old."

Atli, Ása, Helgi, and Rannveig agree that the validation process has given them a better sense of what types of jobs are best suited to them. Not only are they more aware of their strengths, but they also see more clearly how they can improve. "I am aware of where I want to improve before I re-enter the labor market," says Helgi, adding that seeing these connections is empowering: "There's a pretty big difference between believing and knowing." Drawing parallels between their own strengths and labor market requirements gives them the courage to consider how they may need to improve and to decide on the next steps toward their career goals. For some, the process confirms their own ideas, while it opens new possibilities for others.

Confidence and Self-Efficacy Beliefs

For the people we interviewed, the validation process clearly influenced self-concept, more specifically self-efficacy beliefs related to work, school, and career planning. Keep in mind that they had all been undergoing intensive multidisciplinary rehabilitation, of which the validation process was just one aspect. Four participants are in educational programs already, and the other two have plans for their next steps.

For instance, Atli says, "I saw what I was good at. I sort of knew it all the time, but I didn't believe in myself." Similarly, Ása states, "Well, I always... had this in mind, I always wanted to be... but I never had the courage... but I think I did make the decision after that... a bit or completely...". Sigrún, who had struggled with mental health issues, had attempted to enter the labor market before seeking support through rehabilitation. When asked about the validation experience, she said:

... a lot of things surprised me or... well, you've been depressed and somehow, just ill or something, then only a negative view... I was surprised by how much I could do. I'm not as closed... I no longer feel like I can hardly do anything, do not completely see all the things I do, but there's more than one thing. I'm just not as stuck in that place.

Sigrún says the validation process was surprising in many ways, noting that it can be difficult to recognize one's own strengths when struggling with depression. She was stuck thinking, "Yep, I can only do this [little bit], but then all of sudden it's revealed that there's much more you can do." As Sigríður says, "It opened up the possibility of viewing things differently." Ása was surprised by what she learned about herself. "[My] self-confidence went from here to wow," she says, indicating the distance from floor to ceiling. Ása says that while the validation of transversal skills was surprisingly hard, it was well worth it.

Sigríður strikes a similar note: "...by seeing my strengths and, in fact, my whole career, then I realize, 'Wow, wait, I'm super strong in this area, and wait, I also have this strength, I'm a very good communicator and such.'" Sigríður smiles, clearly pleased with what she's learned about herself. Rannveig states that after the validation was complete, she had the self-confidence needed to go back to school and complete her degree: "Just by looking at the strengths that I realize... I was at that point in time focusing completely on my weaknesses, just seeing what I couldn't do, what I didn't know, versus the viewpoint I got, on what I can do, what I know, and how I can use it to my advantage."

Atli has a similar story to tell; discovering his strengths through the validation process changed his mindset. Having previously felt that people simply did not understand him, he explains, "I got something in my hands that told me otherwise." Going into the process, he did not have high expectations; he had been in rehabilitation, and social services had sent him to "all sort of things." The validation confirmed what he already knew, he says, "but [it was] good to get the formal recognitions for myself. Well, there it is on paper.". Helgi saw that he had underestimated himself. In fact, all the participants bring up this point of underestimating oneself. Helgi describes how good it was to see it on paper because people do not always notice his strengths: "Keen is the guest's eye (an old Icelandic proverb). You do get stuck, hmm... in your own idea or self-

concept and somewhat underestimate yourself, or yes, your strengths." Rannveig concludes, "the validation forced me to look inward, forced me to see myself as others see me."

In sum, the validation had positive consequences for the participants' self-esteem, increasing their confidence and empowering them in their career planning. The concrete written results served as an important formal recognition and a jumping-off point for discussing appropriate work and educational options with the career counselor.

Support Throughout the Process - A Key Ingredient

Although the validation of transversal competences resulted in positive outcomes for the participants, the process was difficult for all of them. It was not easy for people with challenging pasts to look inward and identify their capabilities. Some felt that the process was long and taxing. In most cases, they needed to shift their perspectives 180 degrees, from negative to positive.

Sigrún describes how the long evaluation lists "caused her anxiety" and she felt like she was "taking a test." Therefore, the career and guidance counselor was vital for support, both to give examples for clarification and to encourage her to continue. The four women in particular mention how important this support was throughout the process. The counselor was flexible and gave them the time and space they felt they needed. It was crucial that they had already established a rapport with the career and guidance counselor from the beginning of the validation process. Ása says:

I find it [support] utterly important... She was totally there for us, and if we called, she came running. Well, if she hadn't helped so much, I might have stopped, just because I'm just, I'm just like that... this was sometimes a tough period... yes, that's how it is, the counselor does a lot, I think.

The participants were at different places in their lives when they started the validation process, and the support they received was adjusted to meet their individual needs. Rannveig says the process was "an emotional rollercoaster" and she needed a lot of help to evaluate her competences. She was surprised by how difficult it was to look inward, and the counselor played a key role in keeping her on track.

Atli felt that the professionals he worked with in the rehabilitation program did not see his strengths or what sort of work might be suitable for him. But when he went over his validation results with the career and guidance counselor, he had a completely different experience: "In the rehabilitation, there was some misunderstanding about what my strengths are. I think then I did mention validation of prior learning. The validation helped in ... understanding... I also knew when I saw the results what kind of a job I wanted." When asked what he felt was most important about the role of the career and guidance counselor, Helgi hesitated:

Now you beat me. Hmm... well, maybe the process is a bit difficult when going through the evaluation on your own. Maybe you needed something, because you weren't doing much on your own, then you

felt that sometimes an understanding of some of the questions was needed or what they meant or what they wanted. They looked quite similar, some of them.

These responses indicate that career counselors played a vital role in making the validation process successful for the participants, although there is some difference in the way the female and male interviewees talked about it. Most notably the men mention being underestimated by others, but the women focus on own negative self-perception and find it easier to talk about being supported through the process. Some needed constant encouragement and concrete help when feeling anxious and unsure about what was expected of them when going through the self-evaluation. The counselors also helped the participants see connections between their own capabilities and skills needed in the workplace, which was helpful for exploring and planning future careers. Finally, the counselors played a vital role in helping the participants persevere and complete the process despite the challenges.

Summary and Conclusion

Going through the process of validation of transversal competences had positive personal consequences for the people we interviewed. For someone with years of negative educational experiences and tremendous self-doubt, beginning the validation process was not easy. It takes courage and support to overcome the fear of looking inward. When they did, however, the participants found the process to be empowering. It increased their self-esteem and self-efficacy beliefs related to learning and career planning. The formality of the process also seems to play a role, as it lends the results more weight.

According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy beliefs are influenced through persuasion, emotional states, vicarious experiences, and accomplishments, all of which seem to be at play in the validation process of transversal competences. Vicarious experiences and accomplishments are ingrained in the thorough and formal validation process itself, while persuasion and emotional support needed to follow through are provided by the career and guidance counselor. Support and encouragement were found to greatly influence the decision to enroll in education after formal validation (Hallgrímsdóttir, 2012; Kristinsdóttir, 2013) and in adult education in general (Valgeirsdóttir, 2010). Trust, a critical ingredient in the therapeutic alliance, takes time and competences on the counselor's part to build (e.g., Egan, 1994; Leach, 2005), which the validation process seems to allow. The shift from a predominantly negative to a generally more positive view was the catalyst needed to be able to enroll in education and envision a future career. The co-construction of narrative career identity based on stories of experiences is an important factor in career counseling for the agentic self, according to the theory of career construction (Savickas, 2013).

With just six participants, this small study is not without a caveat. At least 200 people in Iceland have gone through the validation of transversal competences. We do not know how many of them completed the validation and what consequences it had for them. However, over 55% of individuals who had their competences validated against formal degree curriculum standards did complete a degree (Indriðadóttir, 2017). It is very likely that the people who volunteered for the study were those who felt the process was

successful for them and experienced positive consequences. Hearing the voices of those who felt differently and possibly discontinued the validation process and exploring their experiences for improvement is also important. Nevertheless, this study shows that validation of transversal competences can increase self-esteem, aid in career planning, and boost enrolment in educational programs. It also highlights the importance of formality and professional support in the process.

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About the Authors



Steinunn Björk Jónatansdóttir has a B.A. degree in Education and an MA degree in Career and Guidance Counselling from The University of Iceland. She is a Career Counselor in a lifelong learning center in Iceland and has worked in adult education and guidance for nine years. She does career guidance and counseling with individuals and groups focusing on those that have not completed degrees beyond compulsory education. She focuses on supporting people in improving their skills in the labor market, self-empowerment, and validation of prior learning.



Arnheiður Gígja Guðmundsdóttir has a diploma in Career and Guidance Counselling from AVH, University in Trondheim, Norway and MA degree from the University of Iceland. She has been working as a Career Counsellor both at the formal School system and Lifelong learning system. She has been a project manager and developed validation procedures at the Education and Training Service Center (ETSC) and Career Guidance and Counselling for adults who have not finished upper secondary school level. Arnheiður Gígja has participated in European projects on guidance and validation and in the Nordic network for adult learning – NVL guidance network and NVL basic skills network.



Dr. Sif Einarsdóttir is a professor at the Career Counselling and Guidance program at the University of Iceland. Her research focuses mainly on vocational interests, cross-cultural assessment, and the development of interests, personality, and life goals. She has also done research on life-long learners and guidance.