

Exploring How Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) Empowers Individuals and Institutions in an Irish and Finnish Context

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Introduction

This paper aims to explore the holistic and learner-centered approach of VPL and to appraise how the central tenet of recognition is achieved through the dialogical approach and methodology, which enables the learner to reflect on their learning journey to date. What is significant from an inclusion perspective is that VPL allows learners, who have come to adult education through a variety of learning pathways, the opportunity to reappraise what constitutes learning as distinct from education in their own experience. This is achieved through a journey that introduces learners to engage in gaining qualifications by naming their skills, past experiences, and achievements through an accreditation process that redresses the imbalance between formal and informal learning. This is of crucial importance as it invites learners to explore and name the hard and soft skills that have been acquired through experiential learning and lived experience, especially at a time when the importance and value of transversal skills in the workplace are increasingly recognized.

This paper will aim to achieve this through an exploration of VPL in Ireland in a local and national context with insights into the Finnish context to compare approaches adopted across jurisdictions. It will provide an overview of the centrality of the dialogical approach in detailing the wider benefits of learning and the VPL process, with case studies used to highlight how VPL has been used to support access, transfer, and progression for a diverse range of applicants in Ireland and Finland. The case studies in this paper will provide insights from an individual, institutional, and societal perspective to the benefits of VPL which will be contextualized in viewing VPL through a lens of inclusive practice and unpacking ways of how the process serves this end through a dialogical approach, which also invites learners to reflect on the qualitative outcome of participation in Vocational Education and Training (VET).

The first case study will provide an overview of VPL in Finland highlighting the cooperation between VET providers and youth workshops which offer a safe environment and strong guidance for the individual before entering the vocational education system. A further case study of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) demonstrated how the NFQ supports access for the individual and supports institutions in doing so. The final case study outlines how the progression opportunities

provided by VPL benefit society, the individual, and institutions in the retention of key skilled staff.

Wider Benefits of Learning

At the Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) Active Inclusion Conference in November 2021, Dr. Ted Fleming referenced the Irish author John McGahern, and recounted from his seminal work *Memoir*, which articulated the memories of the author's mother, and the sense of security conveyed through the recollections of feelings, communications, and connections from his childhood. Dr. Ted Fleming identified recognition as a human need and a legitimate desire from childhood through adulthood and as central to personal development and self-actualization.

Development that is based on the need for recognition and the dialogical approach between educator and learner, and engagement in reflective practice which invites revisiting and reevaluating the skills developed through formal and informal learning, experiential learning and lived experience, is of great significance. Engagement in education, and the certified outcomes of this engagement are central to many education systems both in vocational and higher education systems. Certified outcomes provide currency for learners in the labor market, leading to enhanced employment prospects arising from the acquisition of further skills or qualifications, which is of vital importance in providing pathways from poverty and low paid employment. The growth in awareness of adoption of VPL, and opportunities presented in promoting inclusive practice and widening participation, are evident in case studies of VPL providing access points for under-represented learner cohorts (e.g. Roma^{1a}, Travelling Community) in both formal and informal learning settings. This can be viewed as challenging us as educators to not only reimagine validation as a learner support service, but as mentioned earlier, to challenge the narrative as to what is regarded as knowledge.

VPL within this context can be seen as a disruptor, an enabler, and a means towards enhanced inclusive practice. VPL is disruptive in unpacking what is regarded as learning by both educators and learners; it is a reflective practice that can serve as a mechanism and necessary precursor towards validation, which is at the heart of Freirean pedagogy. VPL also acts as a disruptor in that it brings learning out from being the sole preserve of institutions and into the community, closer to home and the workplace, and places value on skills acquired regardless of means, setting or purpose, identifying what Jane Thompson refers to as *Really Useful Knowledge* (Thompson, 1996). VPL is a great enabler in this sense, not only in the role it takes in empowering individuals in allowing them to appreciate and take pride in being recognized as the essential ingredient in lifelong learning, which in turn fosters growth and development for the learner. The dialogical approach is intrinsic to this as "Only through feedback by others and their own reflections participants will fully realize and internalize the meaning of the experience." (Kolb, 1984 cited in Mutz and Müller, 2016 p.107). While there is no dispute that education plays a significant role in determining an individual's life chances and choices, there is also ample evidence that broad-based access to education contributes to social cohesiveness and stability.

This process is further enhanced through the opportunities for deeper learner reflection by engaging in the exploration of the qualitative outcomes from engagement

in education and training. Tools, such as the Wider Benefits of Learning Tool developed by the Education and Training Boards VET sector in Ireland, stem from an acknowledgement that when a learner participates in a course, there can be a variety of outcomes for that individual, whether through skills acquisition or through dispositional shifts in the learner's outlook that often take place on a parallel basis. This process illustrates the personal and social impacts experienced by learners in VET, other than or in addition to any certified outcomes, and ensures that these are valued equally in overall learning outcomes. This process encourages and assists learners to reflect on their own journey and record the impact of their learning experience in such areas as learner confidence, empowerment and engagement, increased appetite for additional study, and enhanced community and societal engagement and integration. Engagement in such a process can have a profound impact on the learner in supporting and enhancing personal reflection but also on educators in informing program design and development while also providing substantive outcomes that can inform and guide government policy on practices. While the utility can be appreciated in many aspects of VET provision, this process also has validity and impact on prospective learners going through a VPL process and is worthy of further study.

Comparison can be drawn between the Finnish model of VPL and the Irish context in terms of how VPL can be recognized across a broad range of areas. This next case study will detail the Finnish Vocational Education system and how VPL is included in a Youth Workshop setting.

The Collaboration Between Finnish Vocational Education Providers and Youth Workshops

The VET system is at the heart of the Finnish education system. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Agency for Education (2019), the purpose of Finland's VET system is as follows:

is to maintain people's vocational skills and competence, and to ensure that everyone completes at least an upper secondary qualification. VET supports lifelong learning and students' development as human beings and members of society. It provides students with the knowledge and skills necessary for further studies and promotes employment. Moreover, VET contributes to the development of commerce and industry and responds to their competence needs.(p. 6-7)

Guided and goal-oriented workplace learning takes place in various environments and focuses on practical work tasks. Educational institutions, workplaces, youth workshops, educational institution worksites, and virtual learning environments all complement each other. The education provider is responsible for delivering education and training, while the student's organization designates a workplace instructor, ensuring the chosen person has the necessary competencies for the role (Ministry of Education and Culture & Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019).

Under training agreements, students do not have employment contracts and do not receive pay or other compensation. The education provider and the organization collaboratively create the agreement. The workplace is responsible for monitoring the progress, reporting to the education provider, and taking action if the student fails to

achieve the required competencies (Ministry of Education and Culture & Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019).

Ammattiosaamisen kehittämisyhdistys AMKE ry (AMKE) is the advocate and service organization for Finnish VET providers. As mentioned by AMKE, VET is typically tailored to the specific needs of the workplace, taking the student's circumstances into consideration. Hands-on work integrates learning both at the workplace and within the education system (AMKE, 2024). The Finnish National Agency for Education adds that in the workplace, learning is always planned collaboratively with the student, the organization's representative, and the representative of the education provider as part of the personal competence development plan (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2024).

As stated by Into – Association for Outreach Youth Work and Workshop Activities (2021):

A workshop is a training community whose purpose is to reinforce inclusion and wellbeing, identify skills, and provide training that helps participants move on to education and employment. Workshops are based on multi-sectoral cooperation among youth, employment, education, and social and health care services. They are available in 90% of Finnish municipalities. Workshops offer goal-oriented support based on the needs of participants and help them develop skills and competences. (p. 2)

According to Into (2021, p. 2), workshops are designed to enhance various aspects of participants' lives. They aim to improve everyday life management skills and functional capacity, providing crucial support for participants as they navigate their future paths. Additionally, workshops focus on the development of social skills, enabling participants to effectively collaborate and function within group settings. Beyond social and life management skills, workshops also emphasize enhancing professional competencies and soft skills essential in the workplace. By doing so, participants are better equipped to meet the demands of their professional roles. Furthermore, workshops play a vital role in supporting participants in their pursuit of employment, helping them not only find jobs in the open labor market but also maintain their positions effectively. Through these comprehensive efforts, workshops contribute significantly to the personal and professional growth of participants.

Workshops provide a supportive environment and clear guidance to participants before they transition into the VET system. Sometimes the situation can be the opposite: a VET student may need a quieter period with more intensive guidance to be able to continue studying. However, a workshop period can be carried out as a training agreement or an equivalent to it.

Furthermore, workshops offer a structured setting where individuals can gain the necessary skills and confidence to succeed in their future educational and professional endeavors. A key principle of workshops is inclusion, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their background or abilities, can participate and benefit. By fostering an inclusive atmosphere, workshops help to level the playing field, allowing everyone to access valuable resources and support. This inclusive approach not only empowers individuals but also promotes diversity and equality within the VET system. Through

these efforts, workshops play a crucial role in preparing individuals for the next steps in their educational and professional journeys.

Typically, workshops are conducted in small groups, focusing on a hands-on approach to learning. This method emphasizes the development of both soft and hard skills, allowing individuals to gain practical experience and knowledge. The workshop period usually lasts between three and six months, at the end of which the VPL process occurs. Upon completion of this process, individuals receive VPL certificates, which meet the same qualification requirements as those within the official VET system. The unofficial certificates are recognized and can be applied if the individual chooses to pursue a VET qualification unit or a full VET qualification. This recognition ensures that the effort and skills developed during the workshop period are acknowledged within formal educational frameworks, providing a smoother transition for those aiming to further their qualifications.

Additionally, the certificates have proven to be particularly useful when individuals are seeking employment. They act as tangible proof of the skills and knowledge acquired during the workshop period, giving potential employers confidence in the applicants' capabilities.

Overall, the unofficial certificates significantly enhance the self-confidence and prospects of individuals by bridging the gap between non-formal learning experiences and formal recognition, ultimately aiding both educational progression and work opportunities.

The Finnish National Framework for Qualifications and Other Competence Modules (FiNQF) supports applicants from the Youth Workshops to access VET once they complete their workshop period. The next section of this paper will outline the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)² and the benefits of same for VPL applicants.

The Benefits of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications for VPL Applicants

Serving around 200,000 unique learners each year, VET provides a continuum of learning opportunities from Level 1 to Level 6 of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) focused on both core and specific skills development, accompanied by a range of learner supports to facilitate the active inclusion of all citizens. (SOLAS, 2020, p.21)

VPL forms part of this continuum of learning opportunities by facilitating lifelong learning pathways for learners. The existence of the NFQ supports the capture of knowledge, skills and competence acquired by the individual so that it can in turn be validated to support learner Access, Transfer and Progression (ATP). VPL recognizes that learning may be attained for formal, informal, or non-formal learning and through the process of documentation, access, exemption, and accreditation can support (ATP) across provision. As stated by Cedefop (2023):

when validation is used for the formal award of a qualification or certificate, mainly the third and fourth phase (of VPL), the role of the reference point (the

qualification standard, the curricula or programme description) is direct and of crucial importance. (p. 33)

As such, the existence of the NFQ is of paramount importance to the VPL process as it underpins the integrity of the award.

A robust QA process is required to support this validation. Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board (KCETB) first published their VPL Policy in November 2020 with revisions made in 2022. This policy supports the integrity of the VPL process in KCETB by allowing all learning to be recognized and validated, independent of the context in which their learning was achieved. The underlying principles of the KCETB VPL process include:

- Quality - all VPL applications are part of the overall KCETB Quality Assurance process.
- Validity - all VPL applications are judged to have achieved the relevant standard of knowledge, skill and competence required to achieve an award in line with the NFQ.
- Reliability - all VPL applications are assessed to ensure they are accurate, valid, and consistent.
- Fairness - all VPL applications are assessed in a fair manner.
- Transparency - all VPL applications are processed in a transparent manner. In turn all assessments are conducted in line with the standards of the relevant level on the NFQ.

The VPL process follows several key stages and aligns to the five stages of VPL. The first of these being Information and Identification (stage 1 & 2) where the initial application is made and a 'screening process' takes place where the applicant's previous knowledge, skills and competencies both in their work and private life and in terms of previous formal and informal learning are taken into consideration to identify what level they are at on the NFQ. At this stage, information about VPL is provided to the learner and an overview of the NFQ levels and how awards and learning outcomes relate to the standards is conducted.

The next stage is the Documentation stage (stage 3) where following the identification of the awards in which the learner is going to participate, the applicant compiles the relevant documentation to meet the requirements of the learning outcomes and the award standards. The assessor reviews the Assessment (stage 4) to ensure it meets the award standards and is put forward for Certification (stage 5).

In some instances where gaps have emerged during the identification stage and the applicant is intent on a specific major award in a field of learning, there may be an additional stage whereby following the VPL process, the learner participates in taught modules to enable them to complete their major award.

The case study below entitled VPL in action demonstrates this process in terms of Validation of Prior Experiential Learning (VPEL), Validation of Prior Certified Learning (VPCL), and also the alignment of a National Governing Body (NGB) qualification to an award for certification.

VPL in action 1.1: Defense Forces in Kilkenny

These processes and the NFQ as a reference point have enabled KCETB to offer a wide variety of VPEL opportunities to employers in the Kilkenny and Carlow regions. A key partner in this offering has been the Defense Forces in Kilkenny. In 2022, a cohort of seven applicants ranging from Level 4 to 5 on the NFQ were offered the opportunity to have their experience recognized through a VPEL process. One applicant brought with them a particularly wide range of experience that could be validated. This applicant had ten years of service in the Irish Defense Forces. His previous education included an Irish Leaving Certificate, his Defense Forces Training, a Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) NFQ Level 3 Fitness qualification, and a National Governing Body (NGB) Surfing Instruction qualification that mapped to Level 6 on the NFQ. In addition, in his private life, he ran a successful personal training fitness business for three years and had extensive experience as a coach and a player in Gaelic Football and Hurling³.

The graphic that follows identifies the VPL journey for this applicant aligned to the NFQ. The areas in orange show how the previous accredited experience mapped to the NFQ. During the identification stage, six more modules were identified so the applicant could provide enough evidence to receive validation. These are identified in purple on the graphic below. A further mapping process was undertaken to align the Surfing Instruction NGB qualification to the QQI NFQ Level 6 Surfing Instruction. In total, following the process the applicant had seven models recognized on the NFQ.

Figure 1: Mapping of applicants' VPL journey against the NFQ



The applicant's aim in this process was to achieve his QQI NFQ Level 5, Major award in Sports, Recreation and Exercise. To do this, he went on to participate in two taught modules, these being Sports and Recreation, and Exercise and Fitness at Level 5, thus achieving this aim. The main benefit of the NFQ from the applicant's perspective was

that it enhanced the visibility of their current status and where they can go to on their continuum of learning. The fact that the award's currency is transferable and stackable and can be used as a mechanism to align other qualifications against, supports the applicant on their learning journey. The NFQ assures the applicant of the value of their award because the certification received from VPL is of the same value as an award received through a traditional taught module. Finally, one of the most significant benefits of the NFQ for VPL is that from the outset of the process, the applicant can see where their Knowledge, Skills and Competencies sit on the NFQ, they can see where they have come from and clearly see the learning journey ahead of them.

VPL in action 1.2: The TOBAR Project, The KCETB Experience of Validation of Prior Learning in Enhancing Engagement Between Individuals, Educators, and Employers.

Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board (KCETB) supported the Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) through the TOBAR project, which was a national pilot initiative delivered through the Education and Training boards in partnership with the Irish Defense Forces. This report on the TOBAR project 'considers what lessons may be learned from a Recognition of Prior Learning (VPL) pilot project that ran in ten ETBs in partnership with the Defense Forces (DF) over a period from 2018 to 2019 (de Paor, 2021). The project aimed to enhance knowledge and awareness of VPL. This represented a pivotal first step in KCETB's broader strategy to recognize the diverse skills and experiences of applicants through VPL.

During 2020, the KCETB VPL policy was developed and published. This provided the platform for the structured approach to managing VPL applications and provided definitions for the various categories of VPL. As KCETB continued to foster a culture of opportunity and inclusion centred around the individual, the validation of prior learning has emerged as a critical component. By recognizing and validating the unique skills, knowledge, and experiences of applicants, the VPL process empowers individuals to maximize their potential and, where appropriate, contribute to their workplaces in meaningful ways.

According to the Central Statistics Office (CSO): '*In the 12 months to the end of April 2023: There were 141,600 immigrants which was a 16-year high. This was the second successive 12-month period where over 100,000 people migrated to Ireland.*' (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2023). This statistic provides an indication of the scale of inward migration that has been experienced in Ireland in recent years. While presenting challenges in some areas, there are potential opportunities to harness the knowledge, skills, and competencies of migrants. The formal validation of achieved prior learning has provided opportunities for people to get certification for progression and employment. The case study of the VPL applicant provides an account of an immigrant to Ireland who has benefited from VPL and demonstrates the positive impact the VPL process had for the employer.

VPL in action 2: Young Irish Filmmakers

KCETB is the provider of Further Education and Training (VET) in the Kilkenny and Carlow area. Young Irish Filmmakers (YIFM) is an organization based in Kilkenny that provides training workshops and courses for young people on film and animation. YIFM

delivers courses on behalf of KCETB. The Quality Assurance (QA) department at KCETB were contacted by YIFM to see if support was available for one of their contracted employees. Despite being highly skilled and experienced in film production, the employee did not have the required QQI level 6 qualification to allow him to apply for a full-time role. The employee was accepted as a suitable candidate for VPL based on his background and experience.

The first stage of the VPL process was to identify an appropriate QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2024) award. This had to be at a minimum level 6 in a subject-related area. Level 6 is the highest level of award in Further Education and training in Ireland. The award selected was a level 6 -Media Production award. The appropriate combination of component awards was identified, and all the Learning Outcomes (LOs) were collated. To make the process as efficient as possible, an extensive mapping exercise was conducted to identify integration opportunities. This meant that evidence produced could be mapped across more than one component. From this, a series of assessment briefs were produced. The briefs presented the applicant with a series of tasks to compile into a portfolio of evidence. Amongst other evidence, key pieces included previous certification, extensive research, a detailed curriculum vitae, evidence of participation in specific projects, photographic, audio, and digital media materials. Requiring little support, the applicant worked independently on compiling his portfolio over weeks. When complete, the material was assessed, and a distinction grade was awarded across all the components of the award. The assessments were reviewed and graded by a VPL specialist and a subject matter expert before being internally verified and externally authenticated according to the KCETB assessment policy procedures. Following results approval, the results were uploaded, and the applicant received his full QQI Award for 6M5120 Media Production in September 2023. He was then able to apply for a full-time role with YIFM.

The VPL process provided a life-changing opportunity for the applicant in terms of his employment and career progression with YIFM. The achievement allowed him to reach his full potential and participate fully in Irish society, maximizing his skills and benefitting the many learners on YIFM courses. These learners now have an opportunity to learn skills and techniques in the niche area of digital media and filmmaking from an experienced and qualified tutor. YIFM also gained a valuable, experienced, and skilled worker to supplement its talent pool. Certified trainers and instructors are often difficult to recruit in this area as learning is often self-taught and uncertified. The collaborative work between YIFM and KCETB provided an opportunity for further enhancing working relationships, building trust and respect for each other's work. This was a VPL journey for both the applicant and the staff that worked with him. The sense of achievement when the applicant was presented with his certificate was felt by all stakeholders. VPL is an empowering process, presenting applicants with opportunities to get both recognition and formal validation of their learning. This can provide pathways that would otherwise be outside of their reach. But the wider benefits of learning are not just realized for the learner; employers, education providers, and the broader society benefit when people are supported to reach their full potential. Education providers with established systems and procedures that comprehend the validation of all learning provide a valuable function that can be harnessed for all stakeholders' benefit.

Learning from the Irish and Finnish Experiences

The exploration of VPL across the various contexts outlined demonstrates the significant impact these processes can have on individuals, educational institutions, employers, and society at large. From the Irish context to the Finnish Vocational Education System and the case studies presented, it is evident that recognizing and validating diverse forms of learning is crucial for fostering inclusivity, enhancing personal development, and bridging gaps between formal education and practical experience.

The holistic and learner-centered approach of VPL aligns with the fundamental human need for recognition, as highlighted by Dr. Ted Fleming's reference to John McGahern's work. This approach not only validates an individual's past experiences and achievements but also empowers them to reappraise their understanding of learning, particularly for those who have pursued non-traditional educational pathways.

The case studies from KCETB illustrate the practical application of VPL within the Irish NFQ. These examples demonstrate how VPL can create pathways for learners to gain formal qualifications by recognizing their prior experiences, whether from their personal life, sports coaching, or professional work. The NFQ's role in providing a standardized reference point for these validations ensures the integrity and transferability of the qualifications obtained through VPL.

Furthermore, the Finnish model of collaboration between vocational education providers and youth workshops highlights how VPL can be integrated into a comprehensive support system for learners. This approach not only prepares individuals for formal education but also enhances their employability and personal growth.

The case study of the filmmaker working with YIFM and KCETB also highlights the transformative potential of VPL. It demonstrates how recognizing prior learning can open career opportunities, benefit employers by allowing them to fully utilize the skills of their workforce, and contribute to the broader community by enabling skilled individuals to share their expertise.

Ultimately, the continued development and refinement of VPL processes contribute significantly to fostering a culture of lifelong learning. By recognizing and valuing all forms of learning experiences, these approaches encourage individuals to view learning as a continuous, lifelong journey rather than a finite process confined to formal education.

Although not directly addressed in this paper, the economic impact of VPL implementation should not be underestimated. By allowing for more efficient skill recognition and utilization, these processes can significantly benefit employers. Moreover, they can reduce education costs by preventing unnecessary training /retraining and allowing learners to focus on acquiring new skills rather than revalidating existing ones. This efficiency could lead to substantial savings for both individuals and educational institutions.

In conclusion, VPL emerges as a powerful tool for promoting lifelong learning, social inclusion, and economic development. By recognizing the value of all forms of learning –

formal, non-formal, and informal – the process contributes to a more flexible, inclusive, and responsive education system. As educational institutions, employers, and policymakers continue to embrace and refine approaches, they pave the way for a more equitable recognition of skills and knowledge, ultimately benefiting individuals and society

¹ The term “Roma” used at the Council of Europe refers to Roma, Sinti, Kale and related groups in Europe, including Travellers and the Eastern groups (Dom and Lom), and covers the wide diversity of the groups concerned, including persons who identify themselves as Gypsies. Council of Europe, 2012)

² According to QQI (2024), The Irish National Framework of Qualifications can be defined as, "the single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards."

³ Hurling is an Irish game resembling hockey, played with a shorter stick with a broader oval blade. It is the national game of Ireland and may date back to the 2nd millennium BC.

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Fergus has worked in adult and community education and social inclusion for over twenty years, as formerly the Education Programmes Coordinator in the Dublin Northwest Partnership, to his current role as Inclusion Manager with ETBI. He has also worked as a Community Educator in An Cosan and holds an MA in Adult and Community Education, Postgraduate Diploma in Criminological Studies and Postgraduate Certificate in Innovation in Social Enterprise. In this time, he has developed a deep appreciation of the truly transformative effect participation in adult and community education can

have on learners, families, communities and broader society and its ability to provide a voice to those who feel powerless and marginalized in Irish society.

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Peter works as an advisor at Ammattiosaamisen kehittämisyhdistys (AMKE ry), a non-governmental organization advocating for Finnish vocational education providers. AMKE's members educate 98% of graduates entering professions in Finland. Peter's responsibilities include education policy, advocacy, membership services, representing AMKE in working groups, and managing international affairs. Previously, he spent 10 years as a vocational education provider, followed by 5 years focusing on youth work development and the validation of prior learning. He has also served

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