

Empowering Students in Lifelong Learning: Forging a New Practice of VPL in Icelandic Universities

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Introduction

Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) has been ongoing since 2007 in Iceland at the upper secondary school level. The first study program piloted at the university level was the preschool teacher training at the University of Iceland in 2021. Based on that experience, a collaborative project involving four universities in Iceland—University of Iceland, University of Akureyri, University of Reykjavík, and Iceland University of the Arts—has been established and funded by the Icelandic Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Innovation. This paper presents the project, focusing on the strategy developed between the universities for similar, transparent validation processes, partly based on the experience gained in VPL in preschool teacher studies at the University of Iceland. The paper outlines some benefits and challenges, as well as the innovation involved in VPL at the university level in Iceland.

Prior Experience of VPL at University Level

Before the development project began, information was gathered from neighboring countries on the status of VPL at the university level (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Ireland, and Scotland). The information demonstrated that countries implementing VPL at the university level used similar methodologies. Usually, the VPL process is in the hands of each university, and only some departments have started to provide this opportunity. It is most common within technical, health, and business sectors. In many neighboring countries, the main driving force has been an increased number of migrants. However, some countries have VPL at the university level open to everyone, albeit with different application processes. It is important to evaluate the impact that validation has on the individuals who undergo VPL and how the process is empowering (Andersson et al., 2018; Karpíšek & Garbuglia, 2021).

The evaluation of the Statens offentliga utredningar (2018) on VPL in Swedish universities shows that validation increases diversity in the student group and that there are social and economic benefits in implementing VPL, especially for students with a foreign background. Furthermore, the report pointed out that shortening the study time with VPL could lead to increased recruitment and better utilization of courses. VPL can also increase the quality of education through the development of learning criteria for courses and the development of teaching plans. Perspectives on how to meet students with different experiences and how that experience can be enriching for other students with a more traditional background were also highlighted as important considerations (Statens offentliga utredningar, 2018).

The VPL Process and Empowering Learning

The VPL process in this project is grounded in the Nordic model for quality in validation of prior learning (Anderson et.al., 2018). The model includes three perspectives on quality and is targeted toward quality assurance at the organizational, procedural, and validation levels. The model is holistic, including all staff engaged in the validation process, and is dynamic and flexible to adapt to each context. In addition, it is transferable to other countries.

The goal of VPL is to recognize and confirm the knowledge and skills that a person has acquired in life and work through formal, non-formal, and informal contexts. At the university level, students receive ECTS credits (European Credit Transfer System) for the courses they are deemed to pass using the learning criteria of the courses being assessed. The VPL process can shorten the participant's expected studies through demonstrated competence in the areas taught in the courses.

Cedefop (2015, 2017) defines VPL as a process by which a person can have their skills confirmed, no matter where or how they are acquired. The first step involves defining or examining what skills, knowledge and competence the individual has acquired in life and work. The second step complements the first, as it documents the individual's skills and career in an organized way and provides data to confirm knowledge and skills. In the third step, the assessment takes place, whereby a person's knowledge and skills are assessed against given criteria. Consulting with educational institutions when defining the most suitable assessment method is essential. The fourth and final step involves validation or certification of the assessed competencies. This can be done in different ways, but in many countries, knowledge and skills are linked to curricula or other official standards and then recognized as another way to achieve the stated goals (Cedefop, 2015, 2017).

Individuals who undergo VPL can experience the validation as an empowering and learning process. Three dimensions of this learning process are identified:

- To learn what you know – developing awareness of one's prior learning.
- To learn what is required in a validation process.
- To learn how to present your knowledge to get recognition.

This aligns with the experience from the three years that VPL has been ongoing in the preschool teacher studies at the University of Iceland.

Developments in VPL at University Level in Iceland

In Iceland, VPL has been developing rapidly since 2003 and has had a significant impact on adult learning at the secondary school level (50 study programs are now open for VPL). In 2012, the Council of Ministers of the European Union recommended implementing VPL at all school levels by 2018 (Council of the European Union, 2012). In 2015, the European Higher Education Area recommended removing all obstacles to VPL to provide access to higher education programs and encourage higher education institutions to improve their capacity to recognize prior learning. Additionally, national qualification frameworks were to be reviewed to ensure that learning paths within the framework provide for the recognition of prior learning. A 2017 report on VPL at the university level in Iceland played a role in moving the issue forward (Ína Dögg Eypórsdóttir et al., 2017). It emphasized that:

- A shared understanding of what VPL means and that laws and regulations on VPL at the university level should be centralized and similar validation methods used.
- Quality control would be essential, and that statistics and results should be tracked.
- Each university develop VPL to shorten studies that are suitable.
- A development project on the process at the university level could serve as a model for others in the future.

Regarding point three above, the report recommended that the University of Reykjavik focus on VPL for computer science and the University of Iceland on teacher education, as Iceland is experiencing a shortage of teachers. The first study program to be piloted at the university level was the preschool teacher training at the University of Iceland in 2021 (Hreinsdóttir & Sigurðardóttir, 2022). By implementing VPL at the university level in Iceland, the needs of society and the labor market for skills can be met, and professionalism and quality increased. VPL is one of the most effective tools in the education sector to reduce the time barriers to completing a course of study and to assess and validate the skills of immigrants. The introduction of VPL at Icelandic universities can support the validation of skills acquired through informal and experiential learning.

Within the Icelandic Education system, the pre-school sector employs approximately 70% of experienced pre-school sector employees but who lack formal qualification, thus creating a significant need to validate the acquired skills, knowledge and competence of this group. Approximately 60 employees have gone through the validation process in preschool education. Seven courses, taught in preschool teacher education at the University of Iceland, were selected for the process. Varied methods were used in the validation interviews, which were aligned to the learning outcomes, teaching methods, and assessments of the courses included in the VPL process. The teachers participated in finding the best evaluation methods in collaboration with the evaluators.

The experience gained during the development of VPL in teacher education can be used in other study programs at the university level in Iceland to make sure that the validation process is transparent, as learners often have different backgrounds and experiences. There is also the risk that learners do not have the knowledge, skills, and competence expected of a graduated preschool teacher; however, this danger already exists in Iceland, as many who complete, for example, a preschool teacher's master's degree may have a different bachelor's degree than another in the same master's program (Björnsdóttir & Jóhannsdóttir, 2020).

A Collaborative Project at University Level

The four universities in Iceland engaged in this project are: the University of Iceland, the University of Akureyri, the University of Reykjavík, and the Iceland University of the Arts. The project, funded by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Innovation, aims to develop and implement VPL to shorten studies in several study programs offered by each of the universities that are considered suitable for validation, including teacher studies, fashion design, graphic design, police studies, leisure studies, and industrial and technical studies. The purpose of the project is to have similar, transparent validation processes across the participating universities. The universities are setting up a joint validation process that is partly based on the experience gained in VPL in preschool teacher studies at the University of Iceland. Project managers are located within each

university, and the University of Iceland's Department of Education is responsible for the overall project management. A steering group oversees the project and seeks advice from experts from the Nordic countries. A consultant from ENIC/NARIC also provides advice. The project is in its initial months, and this paper offers insight into the collaboration method, interesting challenges, and planned solutions.

Workplan and Methods

The workplan and methods are outlined in Image 1 below. Currently, course criteria are being examined, and a common evaluation process designed. The aim is to present the possibility of VPL to students by autumn 2024. After the first student group completes the process, interviews will be conducted with students, project managers, and evaluators to gather feedback and suggestions for improvement. The project outputs will include a handbook on the VPL process, a proposal for a regulation on VPL at the university level, and a proposal on how to fund the process. A conference will be held to disseminate the project outcome, likely in 2026.

Image 1

Project Workplace and Methodology

Year 2024	Year 2025
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formation of a steering group for each study path Workshop for project representatives Selection of courses and conversation with teachers Selection of project managers, student counselors and evaluators Evaluation process design Creation of guidelines for writing learning outcomes Review of course learning outcomes Presentation of VPL for students Selection of students Training of VPL evaluators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conducting VPL Evaluation of the process Focus group interviews with students Focus group interviews with project managers Focus group interviews with evaluators Summary of results Completion of a handbook on VPL at University level Proposal for regulation Proposal for funding Conference

Innovation

The innovative within this project lies in the implementation of VPL at university level in Iceland through collaboration across multiple universities. Building upon the experience and knowledge created at the secondary school level and in the preschool teacher studies VPL project at the University of Iceland, the current project aims to increase equality in learning and empower students who have extensive experiential learning.

Benefits

Evaluation of VPL in Swedish universities demonstrated that validation increases student body diversity and offers social and economic benefits. The range of documented benefits from implementing VPL at university level include personal, social, and economic variables. Individuals who undergo VPL have indicated that the process is empowering (Andersson et al., 2018; Karpíšek & Garbuglia, 2021). Benefits include increased possibilities to complete formal studies by shortening study time, reducing study load, and recognizing competence achieved through work, often resulting in increased motivation for further study. For universities, VPL can increase diversity within the student body and attract more people to study programs without reducing quality requirements. VPL can influence the formulation of learning outcomes for courses,

increasing quality and flexibility in study paths. Implementing VPL in university programs has also been shown to increase cooperation between the university and the community (Statens offentliga utredningar, 2018).

VPL at the university level in Iceland is expected to deliver similar benefits, especially for students who work and study simultaneously. VPL has the potential to help schools meet the recruitment drive for qualified personnel more quickly (Icelandic Education Policy, 2030). The collaboration aspect will ensure equality, transparency, and quality in the process and outcomes.

Challenges

Challenges to overcome include different cultures in the universities, hurdles concerning academic staff attitudes, developing skills in writing measurable learning outcomes, and creating tools and processes that fit all universities to ensure equal treatment for learners. Funding and workload are also other challenges.

Funding for VPL must be secured, and decisions must be made about whether students will participate in the costs and to what extent. Regulation of VPL at the university level is crucial, and the involvement of trade unions and their educational funds is necessary. The Finnish system of VPL at the university level could serve as a model, where Finnish students can apply for VPL when registering at a university without paying separately, as the Finnish state covers the costs (Karttunen, 2016). Work will be done during the project period to ensure that VPL becomes a sustainable and permanent part of the university's activities, with potential funding from participants, universities, governments, and trade unions.

Outputs

The outputs of the project will be:

- 100 participants who gain qualifications using VPL
- A handbook on the process of VPL at the university level.
- Common VPL processes at four universities.
- Knowledge within each school about writing learning standards.
- A clear process of VPL, including interviews.
- Trained evaluators.
- A proposal for regulation on VPL at the university level.
- A proposal for future funding.

A conference will be held at the end of the project to present its outputs.

Questions to consider in this process

How can we make the VPL process a part of university practice for students and educators?

- How can the validation process become an empowering learning process?
- How can we ensure that students are aware of and able to present their knowledge?
- How can we account for variations in students' knowledge depending on where and how they learned the content of the courses being validated?

- How can the validation process include new learning for both assessors and students?

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