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# TOWARDS THE IDENTIFICATION AND ASSESSMENT OF TRANSVERSAL SKILLS

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## Abstract

Much has been written in recent decades about transversal skills. The term is often used interchangeably with 'soft skills' , 'transferable skills' , 'key skills' and 'core skills'. The Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) [1] assesses the proficiency of adults specifically in three areas: literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments. "These three are considered to be "key information-processing skills" in that they are:


• necessary for fully integrating and participating in the labour market, education and training, and social and civic life;

• highly transferable, in that they are relevant to many social contexts and work situations; and

• "learnable" and, therefore, subject to the influence of policy."


In addition, there has been considerable discourse about the mismatch of the skills acquired through formal, non-formal and informal learning and those needed for the workplace. This may be inevitable in a context where workplaces are dynamic and changing, However, it is recognised that the acquisition and use of transferable skills which can be applied in varying workplace contexts can, to some extent, support the future employability as well as the current employment of the learner.

It is in this context that the VISKA project partnership worked together to arrive at a common understanding and a definition of Transversal Skills with a view to developing a means for identifying and supporting the assessment of these skills in a validation process for low-qualified adults and migrants.

Various definitions of Transversal Skills, such as those developed by CEDEFOP [2], ELGPN [3], ESCO [4], UNESCO [5], Skills Panorama (EC) [6] and Conference board of Canada [7] were considered. While these definitions and the contexts within which they are used differed in several respects, they are interrelated and linked to other categories of skills and competence definitions. This paper will detail a framework to support the identification of a range of skills which has been developed in the context of the enhanced integration of migrant, refuges and adults with low or no qualifications into the workplace.


Keywords: Transversal, soft skills, core skills, literacy, numeracy, problem solving, education, training, formal, informal, non-formal, learning, workplace, transferable

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper describes a common understanding within the VISKA project partnership [8] regarding the definition of Transversal Skills and develops a means for identifying and assessing these transversal skills in a validation process for low-qualified adults and migrants within the project.

The VISKA project is a 3 year Erasmus + K3 Policy Experimentation project focused on the validation of the knowledge, skill and competence of migrants, refugees and low skilled in four partner countries, Norway, Iceland, Belgium Flanders and Ireland.

The VISKA partnership decided to use the term Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) instead of Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL) since the term VPL is broader and includes all types of learning; formal, non-formal and informal. In the case of migrants, there is a need to take all types of

learning into account in the validation process, including documents of formal learning which may not be valued directly as such in the receiving countries National Qualification Frameworks.

As a later activity in the project, assessment standards will be further developed based on the criteria outlined and used in the field-trials in some partner countries. The set of skills composing the framework for Transversal Skills in the context of the VISKA project are presented in Figure 1. It is acknowledged that there are other considerations such as the European Commissions' eight key competence framework [9] which could have relevance within national and European systems, but which are beyond the scope of this paper.

## 2 DEFINITION OF TRANSVERSAL SKILLS

In advance of defining what transversal skills refer to in the context of the VISKA project it is important to acknowledge the extensive discourse around the area of knowledge, skill and competence. It is the latter terms of skill and competence which are of interest to the VISKA project. There is currently no international consensus on the meaning of skills and competences. In fact, the use and definition of skills and competences varies widely. Definitions of skills and competences vary between official documents from the European Commission. A case in point is the Recommendation on key competences for Lifelong learning [9] and the Recommendation on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning [10]. The first recommendation uses "skills" as a component of "competence", while the second one puts the two concepts on the same level, together with "knowledge."

This becomes even more complicated when trying to come to a consensus on the definition of Transversal Skills, a skill set that employers and the labour market are increasingly conscious of and seeking from potential employees. In the narrowest sense, skill refers to being able to do something well, for example, drive a nail. While competence can also be used in a similar way, it has over time become more associated with not only being able to do something well (without a context) but being able to do something relevant but not limited to a role. For example, when it comes to being able to communicate, it is not only a matter of being able to speak or write, but to be able to speak or write competently within different contexts in the family, in the community and in the workplace.

As outlined in the VISKA proposal, Transversal Skills (as opposed to job-specific skills) are commonly understood as the ability to work in a team, to communicate effectively, to be proficient in foreign languages, to be entrepreneurial, to be able to think creatively and to be able to solve problems. Transversal Skills are also referred to as generic skills that include *soft skills* (such as communication, problem solving abilities, teamwork and motivation), but also encompass ICT, language and cognitive skills (such as collaboration, negotiating and information-sharing).

Despite the importance of Transversal Skills in the labour market, in education and in many other life and social domains, they are not always sufficiently visible to be captured and valued. It is by valuing transversal skills that VISKA aims to contribute to encouraging a transnational consensus on, and a common language for, the definition of Transversal Skills, including the development of validation criteria as a prerequisite for their effective documentation and possible outcome of the validation process.

As previously mentioned, the VISKA partner consortium has reviewed various definitions of Transversal Skills, such as those developed by CEDEFOP [2], ELGPN [3], ESCO [4], UNESCO [5], Skills Panorama (EC) [6], Conference board of Canada [7] and more. These definitions differed in several respects, yet they are all interrelated and linked to other categories of skills and competence definitions (Basic Skills, Employability Skills, Key Competences, 21st Century Skills etc.).

Based on discussions among the project partners it was decided to adopt a view of Transversal Skills such as that put forward by UNESCO *(Bangkok) 2014, Asia Pacific* [11]*"Table 1"*:

*"Transversal Skills are those typically considered as not specifically related to a job, task, academic discipline or area of knowledge but as skills that can be used in a wide variety of situations and work settings (IBE 2013). These skills are increasingly in high demand for learners to successfully adapt to changes and to lead meaningful and productive lives."*

*Examples include:*

Table 1 Transversal Skills Source: UNESCO (Bangkok) 2014, Asia Pacific

| |
|---|
| *Critical and innovative thinking* |
| *Inter-personal skills (e.g. presentation and communication skills, organizational skills, teamwork, etc.)* |
| *Intra-personal skills (e.g. self-discipline, enthusiasm, perseverance, self-motivation    etc.)* |
| *Global citizenship (e.g. tolerance, openness, respect for diversity, intercultural understanding, etc.)* |
| *Media and information literacy such as the ability to locate and access information, as well as to analyse and evaluate media content* |

The partners of the VISKA project note the overlap between Transversal Skills, Basic Skills and Key Skills needs to be addressed when developing the criteria for Transversal Skills for use in Validation of Prior Learning (VPL).  Transversal Skills are based on a core of Basic Skills which incorporate '*the skills needed to live in contemporary society, such as listening, speaking, reading, writing and mathematics.'* [12]; [13].

Key Competences and Key Skills are defined as "the sum of skills (Basic and New Basic Skills) needed to live in contemporary knowledge society." [14] [15]

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As Transversal skills can be evidenced at many levels, from basic to advanced, in VISKA the project team consider Transversal Skills as encompassing Basic and Key skills. In VISKA the example "Table 2" of Transversal Skills from UNESCO [11] will be adapted to include the following skills.

*Table 2; Transversal Skills – a set of skills presented as a framework within the VISKA project:*

| |
|---|
| Critical and innovative thinking<br><br>• problem solving, creativity, conscientiousness, entrepreneurship, ability to learn (from Key Skills) |
| Inter-personal skills, such as:<br><br>• presentation and communication skills; both in mother tongue and in foreign language (the specification from Key Skills)<br>• organizational skills<br>• teamwork |
| Intra-personal skills, such as:<br><br>• self-discipline<br>• perseverance<br>• self-motivation |
| Global citizenship, such as:<br><br>• tolerance<br>• openness |

The following work in VISKA will define criteria for Transversal Skills as defined in the table above and test these criteria in validation procedures in partner countries.

## 3 METHODOLOGY

The initial briefing paper was developed through consensus building amongst the partners of the VISKA project whereby national perspectives of transversal skills are aligned with the European and international models of transversal skills.

Desk research on existing systems and models was conducted by the partners of the VISKA project and collated by FRAE, Iceland as a deliverable. The relevance of developed models of transversal skills will be further explored during the field trials.

## 4 TRANSVERSAL SKILLS AND VALIDATION OF PRIOR LEARNING

This section will further discuss the Validation of the transversal skills of learners.

## 4.1 How can Transversal Skills be embedded/used in VPL?

The project aims to make visible the skills of migrants and low-qualified people through identification, documentation and assessment of competences based on agreed criteria.

Identification and documentation are the first two phases of the VPL process as defined in the Council Recommendation [16]. The phases also involve what is called a "skills audit", which, according to the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning [17] , has the aim of helping individuals:

a) to reflect on and become conscious of their actual capabilities (knowledge, skills and competence);
b) to help the unemployed and other disadvantaged groups – for example low skilled adults and migrants – to develop their careers and increase their employability prospects;
c) to provide users with a means of making visible and marketing their skills and competences;
d) to map needs for further training, considering the importance of matching the invidiual's competences with labour market needs.

In the process of identification and documentation of competences it is sometimes a challenge to describe what standards or criteria the person needs to meet in their description of competences. The tools used may have rather vague headings, as for example "*competences from job experience, education/training and other learning arenas such as social/leisure activities*". In this part of the validation process it can be helpful to have more specific criteria that describe the skills that are needed or in demand by society and the labour market. This includes Transversal Skills, as described in this paper. In the VISKA project, partners will define criteria for Transversal Skills to be tested in the trials later in the project period.

Following the documentation of competences, the results could be used:

1) to identify and document own competences/skills **in a wide perspective** (Transversal Skills for example) for personal develoment and/or appropriate job opportunities or education with the individual (phases 1 and 2 of the VPL process);

2) to make an assessment of the documented skills resulting in certification (phases 3 and 4 of the VPL process);
3) to identify and document skills **against job related or curricula related criteria** (phases 1 and 2 of the VPL process);
4) to make a formal assessment of job related/curricula related competences and provide certification in a specific sector (phases 3 and 4 of the VPL process).

Partnership discussions have identified that Transversal Skills should not be used in isolation from other skills of an individual, in order to identify appropriate opportunities for further development and active participation in society. It is necessary to identify Transversal Skills developed both through work experience and within a more personal context (family, leisure, independent studies etc.).

## 4.2 What challenges are linked to validating Transversal Skills with the VISKA target group?

Supporting the growth of human capital by making knowledge, skills and competences more visible is a common challenge for all VISKA partner countries. Currently the 4 countries are facing challenges such as the integration of new workers and addressing skill gaps in the workforce. While there are 4-phased validation arrangements described in the policies of the participating countries, practices remain different and in some of the countries important elements in policy terms are still missing for example, a legal framework for validation and arrangements for financial support.

Validation arrangements are fragmented within each country and could be developed towards increased transparency of competences amongst citizens. There is both a need for better tools (including electronic tools) for identifying and documenting skills (skills audit) and for interventions centered on improving the competences of guidance counsellors and other frontline staff involved in validation processes.

There are some challenges linked to defining criteria for Transversal Skills. Some of the skills are very closely linked to personal characteristics and may be difficult to assess objectively and consequently to improve by further training. It can be ethically problematic to document and assess these kinds of skills.

As a result, VISKA will develop criteria for some chosen skills in the Transversal Skills definition. Criteria will be developed only for skills that the project consortium consider possible to assess in the respective target groups. It is only necessary to consider how these criteria might be met in the target groups and what kind of methods and tools the partners are able to develop and use in the validation process. Reaching the target group may also be a challenge and a measure that needs specific attention itself in conjunction with the development of a linguistically and culturally sensitive VPL procedures.

In validation of Transversal Skills, the frontline staff, especially guidance personnel need to have cultural sensitivity, ability to understand the starting position of the individual, ability to build trust and ability to motivate and support. They need to be able to recognise personal skills through different forms of communication to help the learner to uncover skills that may be relevant for the assessment.

## 4.3 The Validation process

It is important that the validation process of Transversal Skills is well planned and conducted by trained frontline staff and professionals. A basis is set in two VISKA deliverables namely the training Module for Frontline Professionals which presents examples of training programs. The second deliverable is the Holistic Quality Assurance Measures for Validation Services which defines standards which support the quality of validation services and can be used as a guiding light for validation practices, in addition to the European Guidelines on Validation of non-formal and informal learning [17]and other related resources.

Identification and documentation are the first two phases of the VPL process as defined in the Council Recommendation [16]. They may also involve what is called "skills audit", which, according to the aim of the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning [17], has the aim:

- to help individuals to reflect on and become conscious of their actual capabilities (knowledge, skills and competence);

- to help the unemployed and other disadvantaged groups – for example low skilled adults and migrants – to develop their careers and increase their employability prospects;
- to provide users with a means of making visible and marketing their skills and competences;
- to map needs for further training, considering the importance of matching the individual's competences with labour market needs.

### 4.3.1   Results of validation

As noted by the VISKA project partners the results of validation processes depend on which phases are completed. Completing the identification and documentation phases in the VPL process may result in;

a. Identification and documentation of own competences/ skills in a wide perspective (Transversal skills for example) for personal development and/or appropriate job opportunities or education.
b. Identification and documentation of skills against job related or curricula related criteria leading to decision making linked to career development.

Completing all four phases will result in an assessment of the documented skills potentially resulting in certification.

In the table below (Table 3) the use of Transversal Skills in conjunction with the VPL process is described, linked to the results described above.

*Table 3: Stages of validation v's skill classification v's assessment approach*

| VPL phase | Focus | Method |
|---|---|---|
| 1 and 2) | a: Skills are identified and documented based on **specific criteria for Transversal Skills**. The results are formative – making visible a variety of skills, which can be used for personal development and matched with appropriate opportunities for continuing development with the support of guidance.<br><br>b: Skills are identified and documented based on a **specific job or curricula criteria**. The results are formative – making visible a variety of skills, which can be matched with appropriate opportunities for continuing development with the support of guidance. | a: Self-assessment against criteria based on Transversal Skills.<br><br>Making a portfolio with relevant documentation to prove competences.<br><br>May be related to NQF levels. Supported by career guidance (e.g. dialogue, reflections, group work).<br><br>b: Self-assessment against criteria based on a job/curriculum in a specific sector.<br><br>Making a portfolio with relevant documentation to prove competences.<br><br>May be related to NQF levels. Supported by career guidance. |
| 3 and 4 | Skills are formally assessed, and verification provided (certification, approval by stakeholders).<br><br>The results are summative – making visible a specific skill set linked to T*ransversal Skills or/and a profession*. The results are used to move into a job or continuing training/competence development. | Trained assessors assess the competences against job/curriculum/transversal skills criteria.<br>Supported by career guidance. |

When working on validation processes linked to Transversal Skills, the process needs to be interactive and based on a dialogue, reflections and cases linked to personal contexts of the individual participant (work, leisure, school, family etc.), in order to clarify the content of the criteria and make them relevant to the participant's experience.  There will always be a need for flexibility in criteria, methods and tools based on the contexts of different target groups and nations.

## 5   CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, through the VISKA Erasmus + project a list of transversal skills has been identified by the project partners to be further reviewed and refined during the field trial phase of the project.

This paper presents some of the considerations and challenges surrounding transversal skills which will be further explored through the project.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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