Quality in Validation of Prior Learning

Experiences from Work with the Nordic Model for Quality in Validation of Prior Learning

Nordic Network for Adult Learning

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Per Andersson, Timo Halttunen and Ulla Nistrup

Validation of Prior Learning

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Summary

Validation has become a central element in educational policies around the world. In the Nordic countries validation has been practiced especially in the vocational education and training sector (VET) for the past 15–20 years.

This report explores the question of quality in validation, first by introducing the concept in general and secondly in detail by describing the Nordic Model for quality in validation. The researchers were testing the Model in VET institutions in a project coordinated by the Nordic Network on Adult Learning (NVL). Findings from the interactive research are presented from a sample of three colleges situated in Denmark, Finland and Sweden. The Nordic Model can be seen as a structured way to assess the current situation in validation at an institutional level and to identify areas of development. The research does not focus on the quality itself, but on the process of quality work and the process in the cases.

In conclusion, the work with the cases speaks for the usefulness of the Nordic Quality Model for validation as a comprehensive structure for developing the validation system in vocational education and training.

Key words:
validation of non-formal and informal learning,
recognition of prior learning,
quality,
quality assurance,
quality work,
quality model for validation of prior learning.

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Validation

Introduction

Validation of prior learning (VPL) has become a central element in educational policies around the world. VPL has been at the Nordic agenda for the past 15–20 years, and validation is well established in the Nordic countries. Validation in these contexts encompasses formal, non-formal as well as informal learning, but with an emphasis on non-formal and informal learning.

Among the historical reasons for this development in the Nordic countries are the strong tradition of adult education, strong labour unions, and the involvement of the social partners in development of education and lifelong learning initiatives.

This interest in quality in validation was the background for the development of a Nordic model for quality in validation, which took place from 2012 to 2013. Experts from Island, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark involved in the expert network for validation within NVL, the Nordic network for adult learning (*www.nvl.org*), decided to develop a common quality model (Grunnet & Dahler, 2013). The development of the model was funded by Nordplus (*www.nordplusonline.org*). The quality model was primarily developed for use in the educational institutions, however it can also be used by other stakeholders responsible for parts of the validation processes.

In this report we present a study of quality work in validation based on the Nordic quality model. Initially we introduce the quality concept in the context of validation of prior learning as well as the Nordic model for quality. Our study of quality work employs an interactive approach, which is described briefly. Findings from the processes in three cases of validation work in vocational education institutions in Denmark, Finland and Sweden are presented. Finally we discuss the findings and draw some conclusions from the study.

The quality perspective is one of many approaches to understanding and developing the process of validation or recognition of prior learning. For an extensive introduction to an international overview of the topic, see Harris, Wihak and Van Kleef (2014), and for an introduction to recent approaches see Duvekot, Coughlan and Aagaard (2017).

'The Nordic countries are vastly different with regard to their way of organizing and embedding the validation work, and also in their way of handling each individual prior learning assessment. The Nordic countries, however, show a mutual interest in assuring the quality of the validation work'

(Grunnet & Dahler, 2013, p. 4).

The quality concept in validation

Quality assurance of validation is about a large number of factors among which are legislation, policy, financing, and co-operation between institutions and stakeholders. It is also a question about competence development for the practitioners working professionally with validation.

Quality in validation has been defined by the Canadian researcher Joy Van Kleef as

'… the establishment of an environment and the implementation of policies, processes and assessment practices that maximize individuals' opportunities to fully and accurately demonstrate relevant knowledge, skills and competencies (Van Kleef, 2011b)' (Van Kleef, 2014, p. 208)

If we go deeper into the quality concept, it should be acknowledged that the variation in how validation is organized in different contexts influences what could be seen as 'quality'. Firstly, there are a number of factors in the context that are important. For example, the educational system is organized in different ways in different countries, and the responsibilities of different actors in the labour market also vary between countries. Important are also the concrete stakeholders in different contexts. Furthermore, the way of defining quality depends on the purpose of a specific validation activity.

Basically, quality is a matter of validity and reliability in the validation practice. Thus, the basic questions to be put are: Does the validation process 'measure' or assess what is intended? And is this done in a reliable way? But what is the intention, and how is this intention negotiated and decided? These last questions show that what defines 'quality' in validation should not be taken for granted, but is rather a matter of negotiation of meaning, which could result in different situation- and context-dependent conceptions of quality. These conceptions could include varying ideas on what (knowledge and skills) should be assessed, and how this could be done in the best way.

We can then see two faces of quality in validation; faces that appear in practices as well as policies and research on validation. On the one hand flexibility, individualisation, and judgement are central concepts. This perspective begins from an intention to give recognition to individual knowledge and skills that have been developed in varying ways, and in different contexts, thus probably situated in specific practices. It is this variation that calls for flexibility and individualisation. A consequence is the need for individualised assessment, made by a qualified assessor who can see, understand and in a fair way value the qualities in knowledge and skills developed through varying – probably informal – prior learning processes.

The process could and should also mean recognition of the person who has knowledge that is validated.

On the other hand standardisation, reliability, and measurement are central concepts. This is a different perspective, where good validation is not a matter of fair assessment of the individual and his/her specific knowledge. Rather, the important thing is justice in terms of comparability, where the results have to be comparable, e.g. as the basis for fair ranking and selection processes in relation to higher education or recruitment for a position in the labour market.

On top of this distinction, yet another perspective must be added. In this perspective, a shared understanding is needed in order to develop quality in validation without confusion or misunderstanding between involved actors. Van Kleef (2014) thus emphasizes an approach where learning is seen as situated and as a transitional process. The social nature of assessment has to be recognized, and the candidates should get help in positioning their prior learning in the new context where validation is to take place.

The goal of the specific process is also central for deciding what quality is in a certain context of VPL. A validation activity could be employed for different goals – goals that imply varying ideas of quality. We can identify four different types of goals: a formative, a summative, a predictive and a transformative. Formative validation is intended to act as a diagnosis of prior learning, forming the basis for further learning. Here, quality should mean that the validation process provides the best possible basis. Summative validation is typically performed by simply gathering together grades, certificates etc., summing up the results of prior learning in relation to certain criteria. Thus, with this goal a validation process with high quality should measure or assess in relation to those criteria. With a predictive goal, validation is employed to predict who is most likely to succeed in a certain position – and

the main dimension in quality is consequently to what extent this prediction is fulfilled. Finally, using validation with a transformative goal aims at some sort of transformation of the candidate. In other words, the learning dimension of validation (cf. Andersson, 2017) is central, and quality means that the intended transformation has taken place. Such transformation is often more likely to be a side-effect, and possible 'side-goal', of a validation process. But there are also validation processes where the main goal in making individuals' prior learning visible is to strengthen their self-confidence through making them aware of this learning, and maybe in addition 'topping up' this learning.

We also want to highlight two central concepts that should be considered in relation to quality in validation: communication, and recognition. Firstly, communication, ideally resulting in mutual understanding between candidate and assessor, is important for validity. Basically, the candidate has to understand what is required in validation, and how this knowledge is to be presented – and be able to do this presentation. The assessor (representing the responsible organisation arranging validation) has to be able to present the requirements in an understandable way, and to understand the way in which the candidate presents his/her knowledge. Thus, this is a matter of communication and mutual understanding. Secondly, recognition is important for quality, not least from the perspective of the candidate. Validation of prior learning can also be named recognition of prior learning, RPL. But the process could and should also mean recognition of the person who has knowledge that is validated. To be admitted to an educational institution, or to be recruited and employed, would mean recognition for the person. This recognition could be important for a transformative strengthening of self-confidence.

The Nordic model

The Nordic Model for quality in Validation is described as a generic model to be used especially in educational institutions. The model can, however, be used by all stakeholders involved in validation processes. The ultimate purpose of quality assurance in validation is to GUIDE the system and assure the INDIVIDUAL an equal, transparent and reliable process.

THE MODEL INCLUDES THREE
PERSPECTIVES ON QUALITY:

1. **Organisational Quality** in developing a holistic approach for institutions to work with validation of prior learning, as well as the development of evaluation cadences, feedback mechanisms and improvement initiatives at all levels.

2. **Assessment Quality** by using distinct criteria, substantiated choices of methodology, and establishment of evaluation and documentation practices.

3. **Procedural Quality** as distribution of responsibility and roles (who does what, when and for whom?). Clear information, presentations such as website, brochures etc. and professional document handling etc. (Grunnet & Dahler, 2013, p. 14)

In this way, the model is targeted towards quality assurance at an organizational level, at a procedural level and at guidance and assessment levels. It means it is a holistic model including all staff engaged in the validation activities as practitioners working with validation, guiders and leaders in the institution.

Furthermore, the model is a dynamic and flexible model, thus an operational model. The model can be used in different institutional and sectoral contexts which differ from country to country.

The quality model and the eight quality factors

The eight factors (see figure 1) are Information, Preconditions, Documentation, Coordination, Guidance, Mapping, Assessment, and Follow-up. These factors have been selected to ensure an awareness of the entire process and essential features in the validation process including three levels: organizational level, procedural level, and guidance and assessment level. Each of the factors is connected to a number of indicators that can be used continuously in the validation process. The indicators can also be replaced if other indicators may be more relevant in the context.

The intention with both the factors and the indicators is to assure a transparent quality strategy for validation and a developing process for strengthening the quality in validation as such. It means that the validation process, by using well known factors and indicators, can be reflected, evaluated, ensured and continuously improved by the validation staff.

A NORDIC MODEL
for work with quality in validation – a quality assurance model
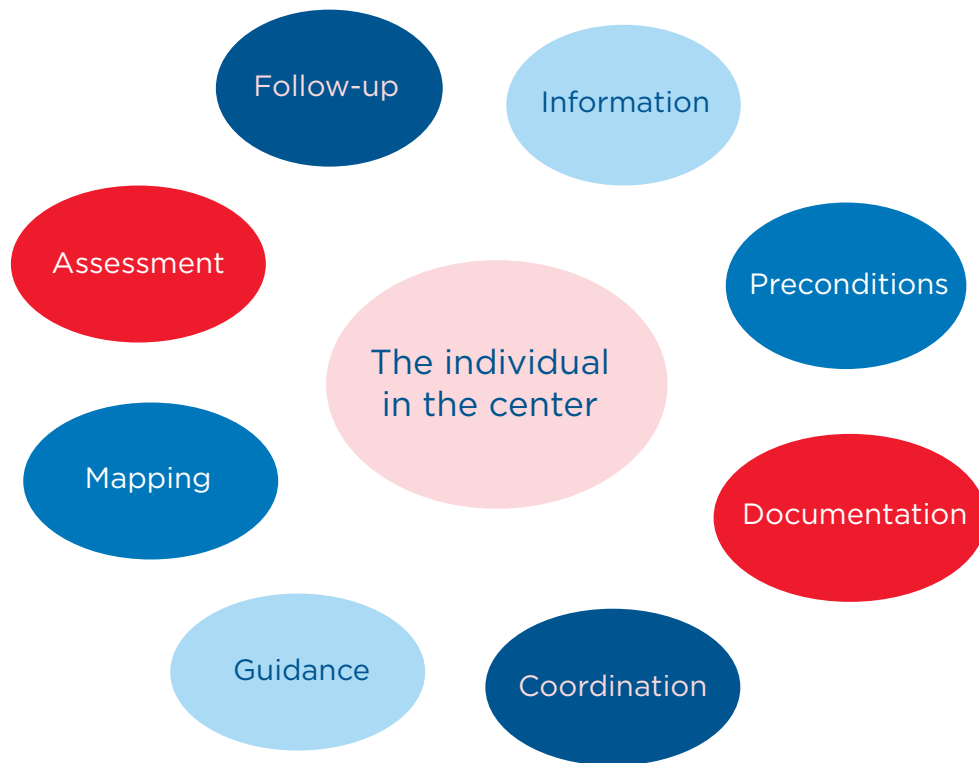
Figure 1. The Nordic quality model.

An example of the eight factors is preconditions. The term 'preconditions' (here) means the regulatory framework for the validation work, national and local policies in the area, if validation activities are funded, and how they are funded, how co-operation with other stakeholders is organized, and if validation is based on standards or competency criteria that are known. The validation staff and the educational institution cannot change the preconditions. But they can reflect on how preconditions influence the quality of the validations. The indicators used in the model are e.g. described as 'Concepts and terms will be used, which are generally accepted and in accordance with guidelines and standards' and 'Assessments are based on standards/criteria' (Grunnet & Dahler, 2013, p. 25). The idea with this dynamic quality model for validation is that you reflect on the indicators described in connection with each of the eight factors and decide how to use them and moderate them if it is needed in your own context. The eight factors and indicators are described more in detail by Grunnet and Dahler (2013).

Research aims

The focus of the present study is quality work in relation to validation of prior learning. It is based on the the Nordic model for quality in validation presented in the previous chapter.

The central part of the study is to clarify whether the model can help those who work professionally with validation to get their understanding of quality reinforced and thus develop and qualify their practical work with validation. The study will further highlight the importance of context and the factors that affect quality development.

The aims of this study are thus:

- To identify if and how the Nordic Quality Model is useful and will strengthen the work of quality in validation.

- To identify factors in the context that influence the quality work in validation.

Our study of quality work in validation

Starting from the Nordic model for work with quality in validation, we initiated a study of how this model could be implemented. The study had an interactive approach (see e.g. Svensson et al., 2002; Ellström, 2008), where we worked in interaction with three institutions in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden.

The interactive approach means that we, together with representatives for the selected institutions, established a common understanding of the quality model. Building on this understanding we also defined areas for development work within the respective institutions. The institutions worked on improving quality in validation within these areas. After a while we met again, for a discussion on experiences and results that far, with an option to redefine or adjust the agreed development areas. After one more period of development work we met once more to identify and document experiences from the different institutions.

The interactive approach was chosen exactly for the opportunity of interaction between us as researchers and the validation practitioners from the involved institutions. This interaction has been necessary to identify areas of development within the framework of the quality model, as well as initiating the actual development work in the institutions. Furthermore, the interactive approach has also been crucial to get a basis for our analysis of the process.

The three institutions with which we have interacted, and that are providing the cases presented below, were selected and approached for involvement in the study based on their experiences of validation work. To be able to make comparisons between the cases we have chosen to involve institutions or cases that have two things in common: they have extensive experiences of validation work, which would provide a solid basis for further development work, and the focus of the development work is validation related to vocational education and training (rather than e.g. higher education). The different national contexts provide a variation within the material, and in addition to this we got variation through a sample including validation in different vocational areas.
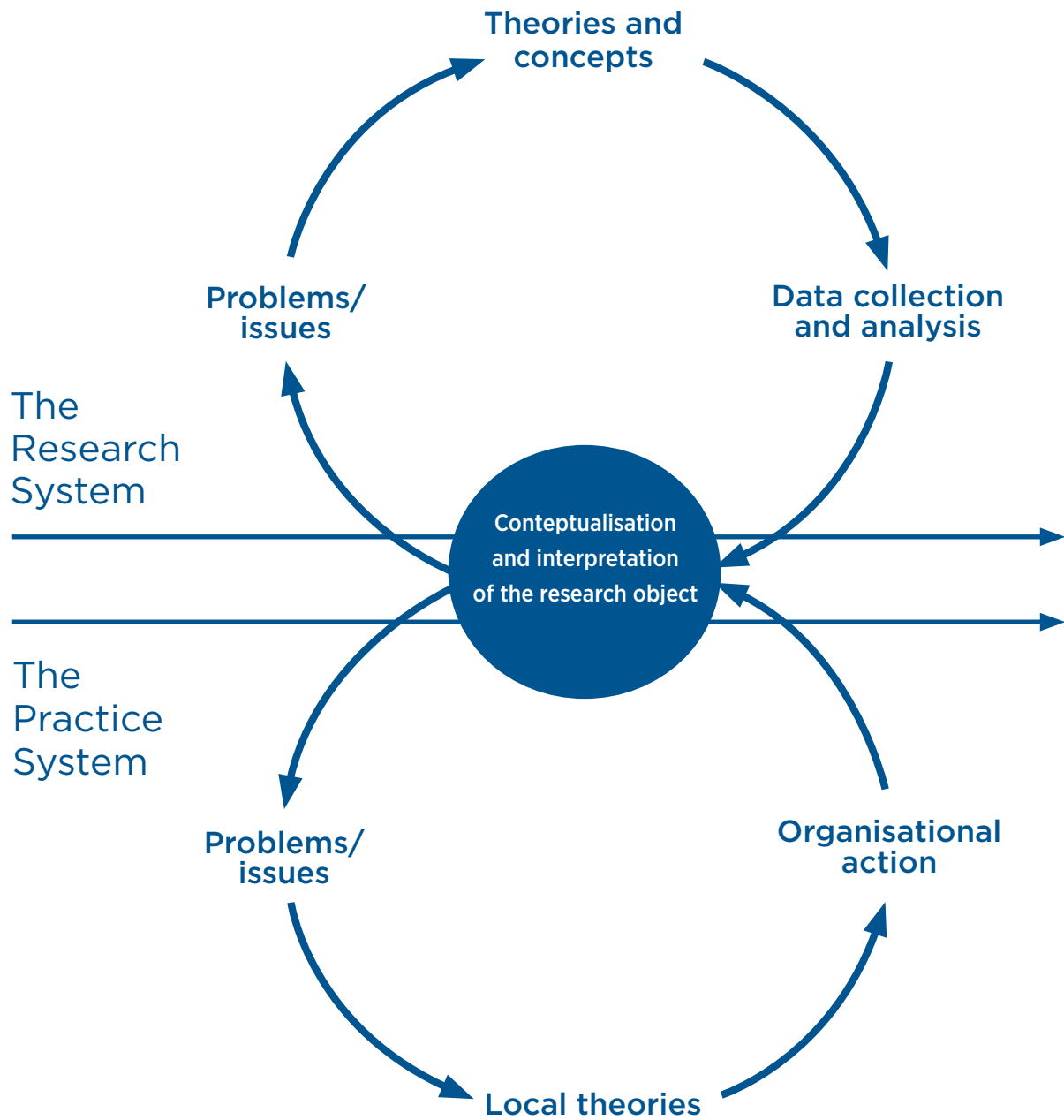
Figure 2.
Interactive research as a two-way flow of problems and knowledge (Ellström, 2008, p. 9).

The interactive approach has been described as 'a two-way flow of problems and knowledge' (Ellström, 2008, p. 9, see figure 2). This means that the approach creates an area of cooperation between the research system and the practice system, in our case research and practice of validation (this is the area in the middle of the figure). We as researchers and the practitioners from our three case institutions met initially to create a common conceptualisation and interpretation of the research object – quality and quality work in validation. On the recurrent occasions when we met again, we developed and re-defined our understanding and realisation of quality work, and between the meetings we worked in our respective systems to develop theories, concepts, and understanding (researchers), and the organisational action to achieve quality of the actual validation work (practitioners).

This report mainly builds upon experiences and findings from this interactive process with the three institutions. In addition to this, the process also included four seminars where we as researchers, and representatives from the involved institutions, met each other as well as representatives from more organisations who work with validation in the Nordic countries. In these seminars, we presented and discussed the quality model, experiences and results from the development work, as well as findings from our analysis of these experiences and results. This contributed to our analysis and a deeper understanding of quality in validation, through the interaction between participants with varying experiences of validation work.

Three cases of quality work in validation

In this study, we have employed the interactive research approach in three different cases in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. In each case, we have worked in interaction with an institution working with validation, where the Nordic quality model has been the starting point for developing quality of validation.

The Danish case

The Danish case study was conducted at a major vocational education college in western Denmark from August 2016 to March 2017. The college has a very wide range of training courses spread over more than 20 different vocational programmes and two business colleges. The school employs approximately 525 full-time employees and educates approximately 3,350 full-time students.

Denmark – Validation in Vocational adult education

Background and framework of the case

The project was established through a collaboration with the team leader for the student counselling office for technical education and the coordinator of Validation of Prior Learning (VPL). The student counselling office is the first point of contact for VPL and coordination of the VPL task is also conducted through this office. The team leader and coordinator were responsible for appointing a number of managers and trainers in four technical fields. For the selected programmes, VPL of adults varies in numbers and frequency.

In response to a new educational reform for vocational education in Denmark in 2015[1], the college wanted to strengthen the implementation of VPL and further develop the school's VPL practice. In the new law, it has become a requirement that everyone over 25 should have a specially organised and shortened adult vo-

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1   *Read more on adult training (EUV) and VPL at the Danish Ministry of Education's website https://uvm.dk/flere-muligheder-for-voksne/euv (Danish only).*

At the meeting, the researchers elaborated on the interactive process and the Nordic quality model.

cational training programme (EUV). This adult training course begins with a VPL, where the adult student should be able to have prior learning, gained through other education, work and leisure activities, officially recognised.

VPL consists of both an objective assessment and an individual assessment. The criteria for the objective assessment are laid down in the ministerial orders for each vocational training course. They define what previous education, courses and what work experience one can have recognised. The individual assessment may allow for further shortening of the course if the prospective student has experience or education that is not described in the regulations, but which the college considers relevant to the education the individual wishes to take. (Cf. the Ministry of Education)

The new law meant that the college had a need to adapt the task of VPL to the new law, including application of the VPL task to all subject areas at the college, where previously it had been restricted to only a number of educational areas.

With the background of the implementation of the new law on VPL, the college saw possibilities in having their current VPL practice developed by participating in the testing of the 'Quality model for validation in the Nordic region' (subsequently referred to as the Nordic quality model).

The interactive process – what happened?

The project started with a brief meeting at the end of August 2016, where only the researchers and the two college staff members who initiated the project attended.

The first meeting was a framework meeting, where the overall framework for the project was mutually negotiated and agreed.[2] Prior to the meeting, the educational institution had received a brief description of the Nordic quality model as well as the researchers' presentation of the process and content for the different phases and meetings. At the meeting, the researchers elaborated on the interactive process and the Nordic quality model.

The college outlined its expectations and framework for the project. Likewise, the team leader and coordinator presented their current VPL practice by outlining the description of the process and the documents used in the VPL. They also described the challenges they were most preoccupied with and the development needs they would particularly focus on throughout the process.

The meeting ended with a joint project agreement and a framework contract was written. The agreement contained a schedule for the subsequent meetings. Likewise, the content and processual framework for the project's meeting days were agreed. It was also agreed what would happen in the intervening days before the next meeting. The framework agreement was written down and distributed after the meeting.

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2   *In the Danish study we were inspired by Benedicte Madsen (2015) and her approach to action learning in practice for the interactive process in the project group of the college.*

The project manager of the school had to designate the participants for the project. So, after the first meeting the team leader and the coordinator selected the project group that was to participate in the development process. In total, seven people were selected. In addition to the team leader and the coordinator, there was a manager from the warehouse and logistics department as well as a teacher. Also, the head of welding and industrial operators and a teacher from the welding education programme were selected. Finally, the head of surface painting was selected. They all had previous experience with VPL and in these subject areas, VPL was in demand due to the high number of adult students.

At the following meeting in mid-November, all seven project participants from the college and two researchers participated.

The meeting started with a presentation of the purpose of the research project and the individual project participants formulated their expectations for their participation in the project. There was a focus on gaining a mutual understanding of the basis for the interactive process and on building a shared ownership of the project.

The college then put into words their perception of what quality in VPL is. This occurred in a joint dialogue. The understanding of quality was based on two perspectives – the organisation's and an individual perspective:

1. The college's uniformity in the VPL task in relation to process, procedure and the basis of assessment.

2. The individual's positive experience of the process: An experience that would preferably lead to increased recognition of one's own competencies and increased motivation for learning and education.

Subsequently, the Nordic quality model was presented by the researchers. The group then worked with the indicators, which were described in schemas that you could make notes on. The dialogue and reflection took place both in the entire project group of VPL practitioners, and in pairs in the subject areas. The individual indicators were discussed to determine if they were relevant to them. If not, they proceeded to other indicators. If they were relevant, they discussed *how* and *if* they had an improvement need in terms of the specific indicator.

Although the team leader and coordinator initially stated that it was in particular in relation to 'mapping' and 'assessment' that there was a developmental need, it turned out that, when the group worked through all eight dimensions, they also identified problems, challenges and improvement opportunities in other areas. The project group ended this meeting by prioritising the following development areas:

- **Information:** Better information to students through a short instructional introduction video
- **Documentation:** Better data management – for the whole college with regard to sensitive personal data
- **Coordination:** Better coordination through more long-term planning for when VPL is offered prior to the various education programmes
- **Coordination:** Through a clear plan for the overall VPL procedure from start to finish (who does what?)
- **Mapping and assessment:** More uniform mapping using joint tests in the subjects Danish, Mathematics, English, Social Studies, etc. at different levels
- **Mapping and assessment:** Better mapping and assessment through a detailed plan (a script) for the professional mapping and assessment including content for the days and the chosen methods for use in the assessments
- **Assessment:** Better assessment through explicit criteria in relation to the academic goals.

A number of other development needs were mentioned, but they were not chosen or prioritised at this meeting.

Before the next meeting, the VPL practitioners worked on the selected development needs. It ended up in production of a number of specific products: an information video, a plan for the overall VPL process, scripts for the VPL assessment process in the individual subject areas; joint tests for general subjects and the explicit setting of academic goals.

The third meeting took place at the end of December. Six persons from the project group in the college and two researchers participated. The meeting started by agreeing a joint programme on the basis of a brief summary from the last meeting and the contents of the framework agreement. The point which occupied most of the discussion was the status of the work with the selected development tasks.

The individual development tasks were presented by the project participants. They were discussed and commented on by the rest of the group. The vast majority of tasks had been developed and solved. During the presentation of the development task, a series of discussions and reflections on the VPL process occurred in relation to a larger organisational context. These dialogues brought other development needs to the attention of the VPL practitioners. Among other things, the VPL practitioners discussed the overall organisational framework for the VPL and the formulated needs that should ensure long-term quality through strategies, the training of colleagues and the development of an evaluation system. The leaders in the project team along with the college's strategic management would subse-

quently follow up on a number of these development needs.

Some of the development needs which were now highlighted had been mentioned at the previous meeting, but had not been prioritised at that time. Others were new and emerged from the dialogue and reflection that the group had at the meeting.

The new focus areas included:

- **Information:** Better internal information and explicit information on the current practice, which today is in the form of tacit knowledge, not least that of the coordinator
- **Preconditions:** Better prerequisites for VPL practitioners, – a wish for internal training of new employees in the work with VPL
- **Preconditions:** Better prerequisites for the VPL task through a clear management strategy for VPL work, including a formulation of the desired quality level
- **Coordination:** Better coordination and sharing of knowledge in a clear common VPL flow
- **Follow-up:** Development of an evaluation system that can ensure the continued quality of the task of VPL
- **Follow-up:** Better follow-up through a VPL network internally at the college
- **Follow-up:** Better quality through an external VPL network with other colleges and collaborators.

A significant discussion took place at the meeting dealing with the dilemma between quality and resources. The practitioners were very pleased to have spotted the potential for increased quality in their VPL practice, but at the same time, it could be a problem if increased quality means increased use of resources in terms of time and people. They could also envisage a problem with competition if surrounding competing schools could offer VPL at a lower quality, but in less time and therefore at a cheaper price for individuals, companies and job centres. VPL is basically perceived as an activity which, for colleges, leads to lower earnings, as the shortened training which is a result of the validation process, leads to less revenue for the college by virtue of the college's taximeter system.

The last meeting took place at the beginning of March 2017. Here, six VPL practitioners and three researchers participated. The meeting had two purposes. Firstly, to record the specific development measures and secondly, to record the development process that the project group had been through.

By this time, several of the newly developed measures had been tested in practice. The first part of the meeting was a presentation of the developed initiatives and the experience gained from them. There was also a presentation of the discussions with the strategic management of the VPL task, in relation to the institution's overall tasks.The final version of the introduction video was shown. Subsequently, the group wishes to produce more videos for different target groups, such as companies and job centres.

An Intranet that will strengthen coordination, information and will create coherence in the VPL flow was also presented. It was under construction, but everyone had great expectations for its use in future VPL work. Subsequently, the VPL practitioners talked about their experience of testing their new VPL process and their VPL script. Their experience was that it had greatly improved their own practice.To conclude the day, the VPL practitioners were interviewed by the researchers about their experience of the overall development process using the Nordic quality model.

After the last meeting, the college informed the researchers that they have continued to work on the development of their VPL practice. They have appointed a VPL practitioner in all subject areas, and an internal VPL network has now been established.They have also established a VPL network among other colleges in the region. Furthermore, they have also made agreements to disseminate information about their experiences to VPL practitioners in two regional areas.

The Nordic quality model – seen from the perspective of the Danish participants

The model

There is widespread agreement among all respondents that the model is a very useful tool for developing and ensuring quality in VPL work for an educational institution.

It creates an overview and helps to break the process down into details, sub-phases, sub-elements and sub-tasks. The model helps to identify relationships, place tasks and responsibilities in the many functions that are part of a VPL process. So, an organisationally complicated process is made both manageable and coherent across the organisation's departments and functions.

They point out that all eight factors are relevant for a coherent and holistic VPL process. The eight dimensions seem to help reveal how the overall complex process becomes manageable and coherent for the organisation, but also for the individual. In fact, there was general satisfaction with the individual being at the heart of the model. It was regarded as positive that the model reminds the VPL practitioners of whom the process is primarily for.

The respondents point out that the factors and indicators contribute to the discussions being lifted and maintained. Questions and indicators have led to increased dialogue about quality, but also about the purpose of VPL in the whole organisation and its relationship to the various courses and to work life generally.

As researchers, we knew that the institution believed that it had a well-developed VPL practice before we started the project. They had stated that it was especially 'mapping' and 'assessment' that should be developed from within. Nevertheless, the project participants were motivated to work through all eight factors and the associated indicators.

The use of the model revealed gaps and weaknesses that they had not previously been aware of. As a result, they found significant development needs and improvement opportunities within all eight factors. So, the model seems to be useful to identify weaknesses and gaps in one's own VPL practice, which one is not directly aware of.

It was also discovered how the factors were connected to each other. Therefore, the development of 'coordination' was perhaps particularly important in the development work. Coordination has been strengthened with common procedures, common standards and a clear division of responsibility of the task creates efficiency and savings in both coordination and the overall task solution.

The respondents welcomed this, although they also point out that there may be a danger of standardisation because flexibility is lost in relation to the individual's needs, as well as a loss of flexibility in relation to differences in education and in the departments.

However, the respondents experience that through their work with the model they have become clearer about what they can advantageously standardise and where they can maintain the points of distinction between education areas and maintain flexibility in relation to the individual.

In the individual departments, the work on the model meant that the employees decided and not least, described their 'mapping and assessment' practices much better.

After respondents had tested their new practice, they emphasised that the overview that the work with the model gives throughout the whole VPL process is also transmitted to the adult student's experience of the process. *'Quite simply, the VPL process becomes understandable to the student because we have a better overview and because we have had the individual's needs at the heart of our improvements'*, says one of the respondents.

One factor in particular, it was agreed, gives rise to reflection: *'follow-up'*. It helps to get a new perspective on the VPL task, as employees hereby see the VPL in a broader context. The importance of knowing the purpose of the VPL and the linking of the VPL process to the subsequent education for the individual and the individual's context becomes very clear to the project group.

'Follow-up' and 'preconditions' are two of the factors that are initially difficult to relate to, which we observed as researchers. It may be that these factors bring a broader, more systematic and organisational perspective into the VPL task. The preconditions have been established legally by the education ministry, and of course they should know and follow them, said the project group.

But at the third meeting the project participants became aware of the possible strategic perspectives inherent in the *'preconditions'* factor. This included an awareness of the management's prioritisation of the task in relation to the institution's other tasks and the securing of the task through qualified employees. It is also necessary that the strategic management explicitly expresses the desired level of quality in the assignment, and this, we observed as researchers, is seen as an aspect under 'preconditions'.

The *follow-up* factor is supplemented by the Danish group with more aspects than those in the model. For them, follow-up and the relationship to a subsequent education programme becomes a very important aspect. Perhaps this should be seen in relation to the Danish legislation for vocational education, where specifically ad lts over 25 must have a VPL before they can embark upon a vocational education. This is in order to assess their prior learning skills which will possibly result in a shortening of the education process.

The factor: *'guidance'* does not receive much attention from the group. Here no real improvement initiatives are set in motion. Responsibility for guidance lies primarily with the VPL coordinator. Before the start of the project, he had formulated and developed a practice for guidance throughout the whole VPL process – before, during and after the assessment. The group does not consider it necessary to make changes or adjustments to the guidance efforts. Except, in the long-term, there is need to ensure that there is a doubling of VPL coordinators/guidance practitioners. This is because, respondents felt that they were vulnerable if the VPL coordinator/guidance practitioner suddenly became ill, left the college or for some reason was absent.

The researchers observed that not all factors are perceived to be equally relevant or important in the practitioner's various tasks or at a given time in the development process. We also observed that certain indicators in the eight factors were not immediately meaningful to the VPL practitioners. So, the practitioners skipped the indicators that were not relevant to them and proceeded to an indicator, which in the given context and situation, seemed relevant. This indicates that users of the model can choose discriminately and do not let themselves be affected by indicators that they cannot relate to.

The VPL practitioners saw only a few weaknesses in the quality model. They did see a need to clarify that the individual had a background:

'And I think if you should … if you should point out one thing or another that you might be able to develop the model with, I think that when we meet a student or citizen or whatever we should call them – there it can be good to switch between institutions and the company, it is at any rate important that the cooperation is prioritised and structured in one way or another. One can say how do you meet the student, what is the background he comes with? Does he have a business background? Does he or she come from the job centre? …'

The language usage in the model diverges slightly with the concepts typically used within the task of VPL in Denmark, but that did not seem to disrupt users when the concepts in the model have been explained, for example, in the publication or during an oral presentation.

The model's factors and indicators inspired the project team to develop their own practice. As researchers we observed that the group focused selectively on factors and indicators when they selected and prioritised their development initiatives. They interpreted the factors and added indicators or aspects that made sense to them in their particular situation. They were apparently not restricted or narrowly controlled by the model. They let themselves be inspired by it and let themselves be challenged to see more developmental needs than had first been expected.

The group sees it as a strength that the individual is at the heart of the model. However, they could see a weakness in that the model does not emphasise the context in which the individual comes from. The individual is not context-free and that context is of major importance for the interaction relating to the individual's VPL process. The process for business employees or the unemployed sent by the job centre will lead to a different course because the partners around the individual will be different and the VPL work always requires external collaboration with, for example, companies and job centres.

They considered that it might be harder to use the model if you have little experience with VPL. In essence, it encourages you to reflect on your own practice and without any practical experience this will be somewhat harder. But it could certainly be done if the process was supported by a good facilitator, the respondents emphasise.

The development process and the framework

The model served as a checking tool, but also as a tool for dialogue and understanding VPL. The process opened and intensified the discussions on the VPL task and the respondents experience that the work and the development process has resulted in increased and deeper insight and understanding of the overall VPL task and this has contributed to the need for improvements.

Putting an undescribed, often individual practice into words and the explicit articulation of tacit knowledge is emphasised by the respondents as one of the strengths of the dialogue in the development process. Discussions in the group across subject areas, roles and levels have led to a deeper understanding of the overall VPL practice. The respondents viewed the setting out of things explicitly as a positive result.

The dialogue in the group has led to greater openness about weaknesses, challenges and barriers in the work. It is an openness they hope will continue in the subsequent VPL practice. For example, it has been easier to go to a colleague and discuss an assessment of a given student that one was uncertain about. The increased dialogue has also contributed to a more open

The VPL process has often been driven by passionate employees and that they have often lacked organisational support.

discussion about the quality level in the VPL work, about the purpose of VPL and the prioritisation of the VPL task not only in the project group, but also in the whole organisation.

As researchers, we have observed that the different factors and indicators of the model initially made the most sense to the practitioners by working closely on their own functions and tasks. For example, we could see that managers and teachers chose to work with their own local plan for *'mapping'* and *'assessment'* as well as the development of methods for the process before they involved themselves in the overall VPL flow. Likewise, the coordinator started in the *'information'* factor, which encompasses the majority of his task. Later, the overall *coordinating* VPL process was taken up. It is apparently easier to start with the factors that are closest to one's own practice and then subsequently to move out into the more common coordinating and organisational factors and aspects in the VPL process.

The respondents experience that it had been a strength that both managers and employees had been together in the development process and in their reflections on their own VPL practice. This had meant that it had been easier to make decisions and act upon the selected development needs.

Employees also found that the work of the interdisciplinary group had helped to shift responsibility for VPL and shift attention on VPL to the entire organisation. As researchers, we know from previous studies that the VPL process has often been driven by passionate employees and that they have often lacked organisational support[3]. The process in the interdisciplinary group has apparently strengthened the organisational anchorage and shifted the pressure from the individual VPL practitioner to the entire organisation.

Among the respondents, there is also agreement that the process should be repeated on a regular basis to ensure and maintain quality. It is a process that must be extended to more employees in the organisation to strengthen the overall VPL practice throughout the whole organisation.

As researchers, we observed a great level of engagement and a great level of responsibility in relation to developing a new VPL practice in the project team. We know from the background of their decision to participate in the project that they were primarily driven by an external motivation; the new reform that needed to be implemented. The initiative to participate in the project also came primarily from the student guidance centre and the other participants in the project needed to be convinced that it was a good idea to participate. One of the educational programmes had an urgent VPL task that may have supported their motivation to participate.

Everyone seemingly took ownership of the development process, among other things, through the chosen development areas and actions. These were initially anchored to their own roles and functions in the VPL task. The development areas and actions were decided upon by the group themselves who chose the areas which made the most sense to them. Priority was given according to their own needs. Ownership for interactive development projects is a prerequisite for the implementation of the developed actions (Madsen, 2015, p. 165), and here this seems to have been successful.

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3   *Cf., among others, The Danish Evaluation Institute/EVA (2010) and the National Centre for Skills Development/ NCK, DPU, Aarhus University (2010).*

Finland – Validation in initial vocational education and adult education

The Finnish case

The discussion on the Finnish case study started in NVL's national working group for validation. The focus of the research was defined to the vocational education level, which led to the national working group identifying a representative case for the research.

The college provides training in 130 vocational qualifications and in 34 fields of study in general upper secondary level education. Over 20,000 young students and adults study in the college annually. The college has units in 4 municipalities and over 700 staff members, of which 50 in teaching and 270 in other work tasks.

A rather large vocational education and training provider in Southern Finland was chosen in order to test the different aspects of the Nordic model on validation in a comprehensive way. It was seen as desirable to analyze how the model would work for organizational development in addition to how the model works as a framework of quality dimensions and indicators in VET.

Validation is carried out throughout the organization, but there are varied ways of implementing the policies in validation for the students. However, the college stresses the importance of going through a comprehensive process of Personal Study Planning (PSP) with each student. This process is used widely in the Finnish education system, starting from preschool and continuing all the way to higher education and adult education. The Personal Study Planning process is also the starting point of the validation process in the college.

Background and framework of the case

The negotiations with the school started with a hearing of the school's key personnel in the validation process. The usefulness of the Nordic quality model could be evaluated in different contexts due to the variety of branches being present in the school. Another feature of the Finnish case would be the two tracks of education being provided: Firstly, the upper secondary vocational qualifications are mostly completed by young learners. Secondly, competence-based qualifications are usually enrolled by adults. After initial approval to participate in the study, the benefits of a research process for the school were discussed.

The vice-rector, development manager and training managers saw that a case study could give a structure for developing validation processes further at the school level. The use of a structured model could also benefit in identifying development tasks and assist in trying to harmonize some of the differences between the branches. Hence, the discussion brought up an additional idea of using the interactive research approach as an opportunity to identify goals for organizational development in the validation process.

The first meeting with the college raised the question concerning in what way the branches actually differ from each other. Validation or recognition of prior learning often involves a reflective discussion between the learner and a counsellor or a teacher. In some professions or fields of education this approach is well in line with the other pedagogical approaches. But are teachers and students in wood industry as keen on such a dialogue as their counterparts in the social sector? Additional local research questions from the viewpoint of organizational development were defined for the Finnish case study:

1. Do the sectors utilize different kinds of methods in guidance or documentation in validation?
2. Are there differences in the roles and tasks of the personnel between the fields of study in validation?

These questions led the planning group into selecting different kinds of branches to be included in the study. Health and Social Services, Wood Processing, Business and Administration, Household and Cleaning Services as well as Hotel, Restaurant and Catering fields were to be interviewed. The professions invited to the interviews were the study counsellors, teachers and training managers.

The interactive process – what happened?

After the first meeting held in the beginning of October 2016, the data collection was taking place between December 2016 and February 2017. The case study in the college was carried out in two rounds of interviews with the mentioned fields of study and the representatives of the professional groups. The Nordic quality model for validation was split into two groups accordingly. The first round of interviews covered the first four dimensions of the model: Information, Preconditions, Documentation and Coordination. The second set of interviews assessed the remaining four dimensions, Guidance, Mapping, Assessment and Follow-up. A third interview session was organized for the management of the school to get an overview of the college level. The last mentioned covered all the eight dimensions on the same occasion.

   The participants received a briefing in written form a week before the interview with the research questions and the dimensions of the model translated into Finnish. The researcher opened the discussion by repeating the aim of the case study – testing the use of the Nordic quality model of validation at school level – to the participants and then asked them to join

an introductory round with a description of their role and tasks in the validation process of the college. The factors were then discussed and the interview was recorded for later analysis. In the interviews there were representatives from both the educational tracks of the school, the upper vocational qualifications for the young and the competence-based qualifications for the adults. These informants also covered the branches mentioned earlier on.

Regarding the interest for organizational development, working with the model helped the school management and staff to identify features of their validation system. The college has a decentralized system of validation, where two important networks can be identified as sources of instruction on validation. Firstly, there is a group of study counsellors working with students at the level of initial vocational education and training. Secondly, there is a group of responsible teachers or head teachers at the level of adult education. These two networks have regular meetings where validation processes are discussed on a regular basis. Information on validation is given in a multifaceted way: on the net, through handouts, brochures and study guides. Information days and guidance appointments give briefings on the policies both for external audiences and the students. The preconditions for validation are partly regulated by the National Board of Education and partly by the college. In guidance a clear process of personal study planning is carried out in both of the mentioned forms of education. However, the branches do have different ways of documenting the validation process, mapping the learning outcomes and assessing the learning outcomes. The branches also differ in their practices on keeping a log on how the process has gone further at the student's level. There was not a clear coordination or a follow-up procedure of the validation system at the college level.

After gathering the interview data in the two sets of interviews with the personnel the model factors were covered with the managers. Based on these the researcher then presented the managers with a SWOT analysis with preliminary findings at the college level. The informants in the branches had identified some challenges in the validation system and these were then compiled into groupings of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The researcher discussed the findings with the managers and in relation to the Danish case, a workshop was organized in February 2017 to identify areas of further development and to choose a pathway for the development process. This workshop was targeted to the planning group of the case study – the vice-rector, development manager and training managers. The study counsellors were also invited in order to involve the second key network in validation to the process. The workshop chose guidance in validation for the focus of development.

Regarding the Nordic quality model of validation, the Finnish case highlighted the following features of the analyzed factors or dimensions of quality in VPL:

- **Information:** information was shared to students, parents, employers and other stakeholders in a multifaceted way. Interviews, information days, meetings and other forms of face-to-face encounters were used in addition to information in print and over the internet.

- **Preconditions:** validation was available for all the students of the college. Validation was also seen as a key element of the educational process by all staff members.

- **Documentation:** electronic systems were available, but were often not used. Some branches had developed good practices and these were decided to be taken into use throughout the organization.

- **Coordination:** there was no clear coordination, nor clear roles and responsibilities in validation. The two networks mentioned coordinated processes in their respective tracks of education.

- **Guidance:** guidance was less available and needed in the adult education track, where head teachers had a heavy workload. In education for the youth the study counsellors could better meet the needs of the students.

- **Mapping:** validation was clearly linked to personal study planning and preparing the student for competence-based examinations. However, the practices differed between the branches.

- **Assessment:** the assessment was carried between the teacher, working life assessor and the student himself. Triangulation in the procedure ensured the quality of assessment.

- **Follow-up:** there was no evidence of an extensive procedure to review the validation system as a whole.

In conclusion, working with the Nordic quality model for validation gave the college an opportunity to see areas of development and structure on how to proceed in the development work. Regarding the local research questions formulated for organizational development of the validation system, the following findings can be stated:

1. There was less variation in validation practices between the sectors or branches than was expected. The use of methods in guidance or documentation was based on the policies and practices in the form of education, that is the track of upper secondary vocational qualifications for young learners or the track of competence-based qualifications for adults.

2. The roles and tasks varied greatly between the personnel profiles in the educational tracks. The work described in the quality indicators was not carried out in a uniform way in the institution.

Considering the larger context the model was piloted in, one has to bear in mind that the two discussed educational tracks will be merged in the future. This development will be following the guidelines of a larger national reform in Vocational Education and Training. The reform calls for combining the resources in the two tracks and the third track present in the Finnish VET system, the apprenticeship training model. The Nordic quality model in validation can assist in bringing the different cultures of education together in respect of the national reform.

After the analysis of the organizational development in validation we now move to discuss how the Nordic quality model could be evaluated as a framework of quality factors and indicators for validation.

The Nordic quality model – seen from the perspective of the Finnish participants

Information

The Nordic quality model states that information about validation is a key factor for development of quality in validation. The indicators on Information on validation were discussed both in youth and adult education tracks. Students in upper secondary vocational qualifications are mostly young learners. These include firstly students with just comprehensive school leaving certificates or secondly students with additional senior secondary school certificates. For the former, validation is mostly just mentioned in the information materials. For the latter, validation is opened more widely and prior certificated learning leads into a shortened study process.

Students in competence-based qualifications are usually adults. Information is given more broadly and the first steps in validation may be done already during the recruiting interviews with teachers. In general, it was the opinion that the policies and practices in the school well illustrated the model criteria for Information in validation.

To conclude, the quality factor and indicators on information in validation gave a good tool to assess how the information covered the different target groups. The indicators raised discussion e.g. on what is comprehensive and adapted information to a specific target group. The indicators gave the personnel working in validation insight into how multifaceted the question of information actually is in validation.

Preconditions

The quality factor and indicators on Preconditions speak about the regulatory framework for the validation work. Communication of the preconditions to the students was seen as a bit of a challenge. Official terms were used in a coherent way both in the youth and adult track of education. Use of abbreviations of the official terms was seen as causing problems in comprehension. Many counsellors and teachers have adopted a strategy to first explain the terms as written in the regulations and then give an explanation in layman's terms. However, it was stated that some of the terms change periodically, which causes misunderstanding during the studies.

Regarding the usefulness of the factor and indicators on Preconditions the discussion raised a question of internal and external preconditions in validation. The national board of education is the external source of regulatory framework in validation. However, many policies and practices are decided at the institutional level. The factor and indicators were useful as regards reflecting the use of terms and communicating them to the different target audiences. In general, the indicators for Preconditions took more time to discuss than the more practical dimensions in the quality model.

The discussion on guidance unfolded the differences between branches and the educational tracks for youths and adults.

Documentation

The quality factor and indicators on Documentation speak for strengthening of internal working procedures and coordination of the validation process. The factor raised many development goals both between the branches and between the youth and adult education tracks. Forms and other documents were produced for validation centrally, but the management of documentation was seen as a challenge. Information didn't flow smoothly between stakeholders in the validation process. The electronic systems were not used uniformly in the educational branches. Documentation is crucial, because learners may be rewarded validation throughout the study process. Some may e.g. work in the evenings and weekends and these non-formal learning experiences may lead into changes in the study plan, even in the middle of the term.

In conclusion, the quality factor and indicators on Documentation were seen as helpful to discuss the current situation and the development of validation in the organization. The indicators for Documentation were further discussed during the indicators presented in the Coordination dimension. There are obviously many linkages between quality indicators for administrative systems and validation procedures on one hand and the management involvement and team collaboration on the other.

Coordination

The model stresses Coordination as a quality factor and indicators based e.g. on equal and fair treatment of individuals. Coordination is cru-

cial also for making sure that practices are performed in accordance with rules and regulations. The criteria on Coordination raised the need to document all the discussions between student, teacher and counsellor to an electronic system in order to build a basis for development of coordination for the whole validation system.

The quality factor and indicators regarding Coordination were seen as useful in the organization because it gave a good overview of what coordination entails in validation. In terms of quality, variation between the different sectors studied depended partly on the coordination of practices. The indicators also raised the question of the learner's own role in validation. Even though validation is seen as a process where the student may or may not want prior learning recognized it was seen that only some learners would be able to coordinate their own validation in the system. What does it then actually mean to have the learner in the centre of the validation system?

Guidance

The quality factor and indicators on Guidance highlight the importance of guidance to the individual in the validation process. The discussion on guidance unfolded the differences between branches and the educational tracks for youths and adults. Study counsellors had a clear system of guidance. They networked in the youth track to develop their practices in spite of the branch they worked in. Teachers in the adult education track had meetings, too, but the branches didn't have matching work profiles and roles. There

was more variation also in the methods used and less shared practic-es. Despite the differences, the actors saw it relevant to discuss how guidance and validation are integrated. Depending on the branch a number of personalized study plans were made due to validation. In some branches the education remained more uniform and groups proceeded the studies with fewer individual arrangements.

The quality factor and indicators on Guidance also stress the im-portance of trained advisors on validation. However, guidance pro-fessionals need not only formal education but also dialogue between peers. It is important to discuss cases and what guidance methods are used. Therefore an indicator on non-formal peer learning events between actors in validation could be added to the indicators. This was stressed from the practitioners also from the perspective of time management: time was scarce for further skills development, but the baseline of competences was seen adequate. Hence it is advisable to create meetings for sharing practices and learning from experiences in authentic situations.

Mapping

The quality factor and indicators on Mapping proved that there is a need for a variety of methods to be used in validation to build a balanced view of the individual's competences. The Personal Study Plan was updated frequently to follow up the learning process. Per-sonal plans were also made for competence testing and assessors from working life took part in the mapping and preparing the stu-dent for competence-based examinations.

The factor and indicators were found useful to see the variation between the branches and the professional roles in guidance and as-sessment. In terms of quality management the variation in mapping practices may be useful from the perspective of flexibility. However, a great deal of variation may also speak about a need for a more clear co-ordination between the actors so that they can learn from each other and find good practices.

Assessment

The Nordic quality model factor and indicators speak for plurality of methods, transparency and openness in the assessment. The school practices were very well in line with the quality criteria. However, the dimension inspired discussion on the focus of assessment when dif-ferent parties are present in the assessment. Companies may focus on the future potential and attitude of the learner. Teachers base their assessment on how the criteria are met in the current situation and what is missing. Students may find it difficult to negotiate mean-ing in these situations. As the quality model suggests, there is need for regular update of assessor skills both in the school and in the working life.

As the factor and indicators state, assessment may be a learning possibility for the student. Transparency and openness of assessment criteria can help to discuss the learning achievements in respect of intended learning outcomes. The quality indicators on assessment were seen as useful for quality management in validation.

Follow-up

The quality factor and indicators on Follow-up produced less discussion at the teacher and counsellor level. The questions helped to make the varied practices visible between the branches and between the youth and adult tracks. In management the indicators were seen as more of a tool in making processes coherent at the whole school level. Regarding the quality indicators, the actors stated that in the school the overall performance was being followed and thus resources were allocated according to the actual needs. However, follow-up of the validation system itself had not been carried out separately.

The Follow-up factor and indicators in the Nordic quality model raised interest for a workshop to be organized. The focus for the workshop was to be the development of the validation system, because the management and staff members saw it as important to build a comprehensive view of their system. Every practitioner had their own viewpoint and a workshop would help to see the overall performance of the institution. This way the follow-up quality factor was an important dimension of the model.

Lessons learned from the Finnish case

The study started by reviewing the development needs of the organization in validation. The usefulness of the model was evaluated in a multi-professional dialogue between the users. The overall result of the testing was that the model proved to be a very comprehensive way to assess and improve the process of quality work in validation.

The approach to quality work was one of increasing the coherency between the different branches in education. This can also be seen as an aim to standardize the validation practices for the whole organisation. The documentation and co-ordination factors and indicators were seen most helpful regarding the organizational development in validation. The other factors in the Nordic quality model were also seen as useful. More instruction from the researcher as facilitator was needed with the Preconditions and Follow-up factors in order to make full use of them.

Based on the Finnish case it can be concluded that the Nordic quality model provided the users a structured way to assess the current situation in validation at an institutional level.

Sweden – Validation in building and construction

The Swedish case

The Swedish case is a municipal vocational education institution in a city in western Sweden. The school has a focus on vocational education and training, and validation, in the area of building and construction, and it is the largest school in this vocational area in Sweden.

The institution has about 500 students, mostly youths in upper secondary school but also around 40 adults. Presently there are 63 employees, including teachers and other staff.

This institution has a long experience of validation work in building and construction. The main part of their validation work is commissioned from the Public employment office (PEO), but the extent of this depends on demand and on procurement processes where different validation institutions 'compete' to be a provider for the PEO. The main target group is presently immigrants with experiences from the building and construction sector in their home countries. In addition to this they also work with validation as part of vocational municipal adult education, and with validation processes for employed workers and commissioned from the building and construction industry.

The approach to validation differs depending on type of validation. When it is part of the formal vocational education, there is a national curriculum and grading system which governs validation too, and the result could be exemptions within the vocational programme. Validation commissioned from the PEO is designed depending on the requirements from the PEO, which has as its main task to work for employability and employment. Therefore, the PEO models are likely to be related to the industry models, which are designed to identify competence among active workers in the industry.

Finally, the validation work here is not only part of the building and construction school but also closely connected to a regional organisation for coordination and support in development of and work with validation in the region. This organisation has a general responsibility in the area of validation, independent of e.g. vocational area. The work with validation has a history dating back to the late 1990s when the idea of validation was introduced in Sweden.

The region for the case was chosen based on the long experience and history of validation work, which is well-known in the context of validation in Sweden. Here we chose the specific case in dialogue with the regional organisation, to find a specific case with experiences to build upon in the work with the quality model.

The interactive process – what happened?

The case study took place during the period September 2016–March 2017. During this period we visited the institution three times, and we were also in touch with them before, between and after these visits. Two researchers were involved in the study during 2016, and one researcher finalised the study during 2017.

Initially focus was put on the area of information, which was seen as very important to reach the target group.

Before the first visit in September, they received a flyer with short information about our project, and the booklet describing the Nordic quality model (Grunnet & Dahler, 2013) We also provided information about the planned content of our first visit and session.

During the first visit six persons participated, the two researchers, two teachers and the head of validation from the vocational school, and the director of the regional validation organisation. Both teachers and the head of validation have a background from the building and construction industry.

Initially the head and the teachers described their approach to validation, which is based on initial mapping, and assessment through practical work in connection to reflection, and with the opportunity of 'topping up' with supplementary studies after the validation process. We also had the opportunity to look at the building site where students can practice and learn, and participants in validation show their actual vocational skills. After this we presented the quality model and its different factors, and there was opportunity for questions based on the presentation and the participants' prior reading of the booklet. We also presented the design of the project, and the interactive approach with its double focus on developing quality of validation in the local organisation, and developing experiences and knowledge of quality work based on the Nordic model.

After the presentation and discussion, we had a workshop where the local validation work was discussed in relation to the quality model, with the aim to identify areas for development.

The following possible areas of development were identified during the initial workshop:

- **Information:** Developing information to candidates before the validation process. What do they need to know? How could information to candidates with low skills in the Swedish language be developed?

- **Pre-conditions:** Improving the continuing professional development (CPD) for those who work with validation.

- **Mapping:** Improving the mapping of competences for candidates who are newly arrived refugees/immigrants.

- **Assessment:** Improving the quality of the assessment in cases where candidates are lacking communicative skills in the Swedish language (but possibly have the vocational skills to be assessed).

- **Follow-up:** Developing the evaluations of the validation process to understand quality better.

The local validation staff were committed to start working with quality within these areas. Initially focus was put on the area of information, which was seen as very important to reach the target group – those who actually have relevant vocational competence. The institution could identify a need for more standardised information about validation, i.e. to give a correct idea of what validation is, independent of who presents the information. But it is also a matter of giving relevant information to the specific target group. When the target group has a foreign background, inter-

preters also consist of a key group concerning information – and here the specific vocational language is identified as a challenge, as the vocational language includes many vocation-specific terms that could be difficult to translate, especially when the interpreter does not necessarily know the vocation in question.

The place where information is given was also identified as important. Information to potential candidates is often given at the PEO, but it will be considered if more extensive information could be given at the validation institution, including not only verbal and written information, but in addition to this also being able to show the material conditions, clarify the requirements, and answer questions in that context.

The second workshop took place at the school in November 2016, when the abovementioned experiences concerning information were described. In this workshop, the same two researchers participated as well as the local representatives, except for the director of the regional validation organisation. In this workshop, we also asked the local representatives to talk about their present view of quality in validation, as a basis for understanding their development initiatives. Furthermore, we discussed the areas of development identified in the previous workshop, and the conclusion was that the main focus now should be pre-conditions in terms of CPD (see above) and mapping.

Thus, the next area in focus was intended to be improvement of pre-conditions through the CPD of the validation staff. The validation work in the institution seemed to be organised in a way that allowed space for professional development concerning the core of the validation process. But to improve quality, the representatives of the institution could see a potential particularly concerning competence that is relevant in relation to varying parts of the validation process. Two specific examples mentioned were counselling skills, and how to write the documentation of the validation results in a correct way. That is, we can see that the CPD needs concerned aspects of pre-conditions closely related to other factors in the quality model – documentation, guidance, and follow-up.

However, the main focus in the actual development process after the second workshop rather became the tools and procedures for mapping of candidates' competence. The quality model and our project were introduced at a moment where the demand for validation was low, due to an ongoing procurement process in relation to the PEO. In this situation, the staff saw development of mapping as the most relevant area for development, preparing for new validation work that was expected to come. In this area, new tools for mapping were created. The tool was built on the framework of relevant courses in vocational education, which the validation process was expected to relate to. That is, the descriptions of

knowledge and competence to be validated were based on the requirements for specific course modules, and grading criteria concerning breadth and depth of knowledge. This development work was done in cooperation between the above mentioned staff at the school, and the director of the regional organisation.

The third workshop took place in March 2017. One researcher participated as well as the two teachers who had been most active in the development work, three other building and construction teachers involved in the work at the school, and the director from the regional organisation. The work on mapping (see above) was described and discussed, as well as the general experiences of the development work and the interactive process.

   After the third workshop, we were in touch with the validation staff in the institution, to take part of their further experiences, when the procurement process had ended and there had been more opportunities to put the development work into practice. Here, the reported experiences were positive, for example from a mapping process that is providing a better basis for planning validation/assessment and training to come after mapping.

Furthermore, there was the intention to continue the development work even after the present project.

Lessons learnt from the Swedish case

There are a number of lessons learnt from this interactive process that we want to highlight. These concern the approach to validation, the idea of quality in this local context, the experiences of the quality model, and local and national conditions.

Approach to validation

The validation model in this institution has an approach with a clear focus on quality in terms of an extensive process to identify and validate candidates' competences, including practical work-tasks, and the opportunity to 'top up' with context-specific skills that are lacking. That is, employability is seen as important, a factor that is also a matter of credibility in relation to the industry. The representatives of the institution described that an initial mapping should show that the candidates could fulfil at least half of the requirements for the more encompassing validation process to be meaningful – otherwise the main alternative is to take the full training programme. However, this is also a matter of time and resources available, which in the case of commissioned validation depends on the agreements and conditions for the specific procurement.

The idea of quality

Concerning quality, the conception of quality that is expressed in this case in brief encompasses the following aspects: Resources and time is a precondition for quality. A validation process should include an initial mapping and pre-assessment of who will pass the more extensive validation. Quality in the process depends on being up-to-date in relation to current technology, i.e. industry currency. Important for quality is that the assessment of skills should be made by an experienced craftsman in the specific area. When the candidates have a foreign background, it is important to understand what skills they actually have. Quality could also be identified by employers being satisfied with employees recruited from the validation institution.

Local conditions – the procurement process

However, the extensive procurement process in relation to the PEO, which was ongoing – and delayed – during our study, created worries and made the extent of future validation work in this institution unclear for the involved actors. In other words, it was unclear for quite a long time what the institution would be commissioned to do in the nearest future. At the end of our project, the situation became more stable, when the outcome of the procurement process was an increasing demand for validation work. But the new procurement was based on a principle of free choice, which means that each potential candidate (who is unemployed and registered at the PEO) will now be free to choose a validation provider that is included in the procurement for his or her specific vocational area. Still, this did not seem to pose a major problem for this provider, as there were few competitors providing validation in this vocational area. Thus, at the end of our project, this institution had yet had rather limited opportunities to put the results of the quality work on mapping in action.

It should be noted that this procurement process was not expected to be so time-consuming when our study was initiated. If this had been known beforehand, we might had chosen another case with more focus on an area not that dependent on the PEO, but with more validation in relation to formal vocational adult education or industry models. However, the interactive process still resulted in valuable experiences and outcomes.

The model put focus on quality

The experiences concerning the work with the Nordic quality model were that it actually put focus on the quality dimension in validation, it was experienced as a valuable starting point for quality work. The institution representatives initially had good confidence in the quality of their work, and our interpretation was also that they were experienced in the area and made a good job. Still, the discussion based on the quality model helped them to identify relevant areas for development, and the process that started showed an ambition to improve the quality of validation in building and construction.

Harmonizing the model with national guidelines?

However, concerning the quality model, the local representatives highlighted a national problem – this Nordic model is not fully harmonized with the developing national guidelines, which could be confusing when the model is put into work. For the future, the practitioners emphasise that it would be more useful if the model is translated into Swedish, but also transformed for use in Sweden when it comes to those parts that are not harmonized. Here, however, it should be mentioned that there is ongoing development work concerning validation models, rules, and guidelines on a national level, which means that there could be amendments in the present guidelines.

Discussions

We will start by discussing the three cases involved in the study. After this we discuss the Nordic quality model for validation, and finally we put focus on the interactive approach of the present study.

The Nordic model was introduced in all three case studies and the studies had the same aim:

1. to identify if and how the Nordic quality model is useful and will strengthen the work of quality in validation.

2. to identify factors in the context that influence the quality work in validation.

About the three cases

The study took place in three different VET institutions, in three Nordic countries with different legislations of VPL. In Finland and Sweden there are National guidelines for the VPL work. In Denmark there are no national guidelines, but there are quality strategies in the regional vocational training centres for adults.

The size of the VET institutions varies between the cases as well as the number of branches involved in the development process and the number of participants in the three cases. Furthermore, there is also a variation in aim. In the Swedish case the aim of VPL is mainly employment and the target group are adults (mainly immigrants). In the Danish case the aim of VPL is further education with a personal study plan for adults. It is similar in the Finnish case except for the fact that the target group can be both adults and young students. It should also be noted that all VPL actors in the three cases had extensive experiences of validation work.

We had an interactive approach in all three case studies, even though we conducted the studies in somewhat different ways (see Table 1). In Sweden and Denmark we started with workshops based on dialogues on the quality model and with the aim to identify improvements in the VPL work. We ended up with interviews about the quality developing process and the model. In Finland we started with interviews based on the indicators of the quality model, continued with a SWOT analysis of the data, and ended with a workshop aiming at development of the quality in validation work.The different contexts and the variety in the processes do not seem to influence the usefulness of the Nordic quality model. This will be further explained below.

Table 1.
Variation between the three cases concerning institutions, aim in VPL,
motivation for project, the interactive process and group of participants.

	DANISH CASE	FINNISH CASE	SWEDISH CASE
VET institutions	4 branches	5 branches	1 branch
Aim in VPL	Plan for further education	Personal study plan	Employment
Motivation for the project	Improving and implementing new VPL legalization	Improving VPL practice in general	Improving practice for new target group
The interactive process	2 workshops identifying needs and development needs 1 follow up meeting incl. interviews after testing new VPL practice	2 interviews SWOT analysis Workshop identifying developing areas for new practice	2 workshops identifying needs and developing new practice 1 follow up meeting
The group – numbers	6-7	6-8	6
The group – staff members	Managers, teachers/ assessors counsellors	Managers at different levels, teachers/ assessors, counsellors	Manager, teachers/ assessors, counsellors

About the model

Here we will point out what we found in general and then we will compare the three studies and give some comments concerning differences and similarities between the cases.

The three case studies speak for the usefulness of the Nordic quality model for validation as a comprehensive structure for developing the validation system. At the same time the process visualised awareness of the different aspects of what quality in validation includes. The model was very useful to understand the complexity of the VPL process, and the different actors involved in the quality work and their roles and responsibilities. It made them see the whole 'VPL picture' and clarified the purpose of a validation process.

Working with the model has shown how motivated managers and staff members have been for quality management of validation and to identify development areas in their policies and practices. The model seems to give a structure and frame for the work that facilitates the quality work.

The following general conclusions can be drawn regarding the factors and quality indicators presented in the Nordic quality model:

The eight factors are relevant for a holistic approach to validation

The use of the quality model in interaction between the managers and the practitioners helped to identify areas of development

The case studies give implications for the model to be used also as a means for competence developmentin the educational institutions

Systematic *documentation* is paramount for the individual's VPL case

Coordination **of validation** ensures that the policies and practices are carried throughout the various branches and fields of study of the institutions

The *follow-up* **factor** can be seen as a broader review of the educational processes related to validation, covering performance in the organizational level

The *precondition* **factor** could be seen as both an internal organizational and external national regulatory framework

NORWAY

ICELAND

SWEDEN

DENMARK

FINLAND
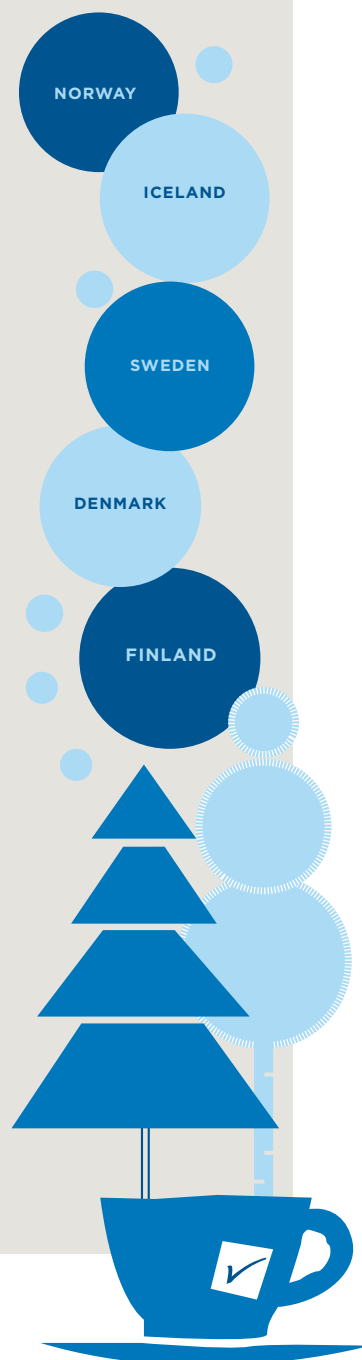
Table 2.
Variation between the three cases concerning prioritized factors or development areas. (Capital X indicates particular priority.)

	DANISH CASE	FINNISH CASE	SWEDISH CASE
Information	X	X	X
Precondition	X	X	X
Documentation	(X)	X	
Coordination	X	X	
Guidance		X	
Mapping	X		X
Assessment	X		X
Follow up	X	X	X

The three cases show a variety concerning the chosen factors or development areas when we compare them (see Table 2). In the Danish case the involved actors worked with all factors except for the *guidance* factor. They developed both at a branch (educational programmes) level and at an organisational level. They focused on standards and flexibility in the quality process and became aware of the formative or transformative aspect of the validation process. In the Swedish case the main focus was work with and preparing for a partly new target group. Their quality work focused on the information, mapping and assessment process for this target group. In the Finnish case there was a very organisational view on the qual-

ity work. They compared the VPL practice in the different branches (education programmes) in order to standardize the practice for the whole organisation.

So we have seen how a general model can be used in different contexts and with different aims. The quality workers choose to work with the factors and indicators that are meaningful in their respective situations. But relating a general model to a specific context and situation has to be considered, and there needs to be time spent on discussion for clarification of the factors. The indicators could also need clarification – in what ways do actors/ models in a local context actually fulfil an indicator, and how could the quality model be developed further?

We recognized in the study that the concepts used in the model vary from the concepts used in the national contexts in Sweden, Denmark and Finland. In Sweden and Finland there are National Guidelines for Validation, and the Nordic quality model does not adapt fully to these. Maybe a better adaptation or flexibility in relation to national guidelines would be possible in a new edition of the Nordic model?

In the Nordic quality model the individual is in the center. The participants in the study found this very helpful, but at the same time they suggested that the model should include the context or background of the individual, e.g. is it an immigrant, unemployed, employed, student or drop-out from earlier studies. That would improve the model, according to some of our informants.

We have found that the Nordic quality model is very useful, but it can also be improved, if it adapts to national conditions, guidelines, concepts and is translated into all the Nordic languages. That will make it easier to understand and use in all the Nordic countries.

An interactive learning and development process

This study based on the Nordic quality model on validation followed an interactive research approach. The study could be seen as a learning space, where researchers and actors in schools engaged in a process of collaborative learning. This interactive research approach may be well suited to a vocational education and training institution, as research (see e.g. Roberts, 2007) shows that staff of educational institutions, like teachers and counsellors, often use interactive methods such as consulting with colleagues and mentoring in their continuing professional development.

The interactive approach provided an opportunity for collective knowledge creation through applying the Nordic quality model to an institutional context. As a learning space this study formed a neutral ground to discuss the validation policies and practices. The focus was on the usefulness of the model and the quality indicators, not on evaluating how well the quality indicators were met by a certain institution, a professional group, or an individual in the institution/school. This had an emancipatory effect on the dialogue, helping the actors to identify goals for development and take action to achieve those goals. They had opportunities for sharing experiences and building a common understanding of the quality factors in the schools. Thus, the interactive approach

As facilitators we had to explain, interpret and adapt the model to the national and local context.

employed, created a space to discuss validation in a neutral and unbiased way, and created a learning space for the participants in the three cases.

The actors at the institution level were brought to a collaborative learning space. Their knowledge of the policies and practices on validation as well as their needs for organisational development were explicated and discussed. Was it important who were involved in the interactive process for the learning and developing outcome? It seems as if it is important to have a mix of different categories of staff. Both key actors and managers could be needed to legalize decisions and make development in the organisations' validation practices happen. Meeting representatives from different branches could also be valuable and involving actors with different backgrounds who normally do not interact with each other could strengthen the outcome of the processes – also for developing an organisational responsibility for the validation work and making quality development to an on-going process with continuous work for long-term change.

What did our facilitating role (acting both as researchers *and* facilitators) mean for the outcomes? Is facilitation necessary, or important? Our experiences indicate that someone internal or external needs to know the model, the factors and the indicators, to have something to start from. We found that the booklet (Grunnet & Dahler, 2013) did not instruct or facilitate well enough. As facilitators we had to explain, interpret and adapt the model to the national and local context. But further work of this type will also require an instruction or plan for the process. If based solely on the self-directedness of learners involved, the results may be limited when compared to a screening exercise on quality of validation that is led by a facilitator. Otherwise the booklet should be further developed with more description of the interactive process.

Conclusion

Going back to the aims of our study, the three cases from Denmark, Finland, and Sweden have shown that the Nordic quality model could be useful in and also strengthen the work with quality in validation.

The interactive approach was also a rewarding way to work with quality in validation based on the quality model. We have also found factors in the context that influence the quality work. This context consists of national educational systems with varying policies and practices, different branches when it comes to validation of vocational competence, regional and local institutions, and not least the aim of a validation effort in relation to an individual participant and her or his life context.

The different factors of quality in validation were presented at the beginning of this study. The educational systems differ between the Nordic countries and correspondingly the validation in VET in Denmark, Finland and Sweden represent the national educational systems. Regarding the situation and context-depending conceptions of quality, the branches studied in this research also have varying intentions in negotiating meaning in validation. At the institutional level teachers or assessors working in a specific branch may have different ways to carry out formative validation, that is to diagnose prior learning. However, the variation between actors is diminished if a variety of methods of assessment is used. Summative validation, e.g. validation with the aim to grant the individual formal credentials like grades or certificates with a national validity, is usually more coherent across the institutions.

National policies may strengthen the uniformity of formative and summative validation within an institution. The national qualification requirements for vocational qualifications form a basis for vocational education and a benchmark for validation of prior learning. Policies also form practices, such as the Personal Study Planning (PSP) process in Finland that is used in each educational institution to draw up a personalized curriculum for the student. These practices support validation by providing the student with the flexibility and individualised judgement they need, yet support coherence between the involved actors at the institutional level by providing a framework to work within.

The factors presented in the Nordic quality model strengthen this framework by encouraging the actors to discuss standardization, reliability and measurement in validation. The factor 'Preconditions' in the model quite accurately refers to the regulatory framework for the validation work.

The learner is in the centre of the educational process, as in the quality model.

These frameworks were further discussed with the institutions involved in the study in relation to the quality criteria presented under the factors of 'Documentation' and 'Coordination' in the model. Judging from the piloting phase, it can be said that the mentioned factors are very much in line with the validity and reliability demands for quality in validation. Are the policies brought into practice within the institution? Clear procedures, guidelines and work processes call for a certain amount of coordination, teamwork and a strategic view on the validation work. With resources and priority of the quality work the educational institutions can ensure procedural and organisational quality.

The contextuality of validation was also discussed in this study by paying attention to the social nature of assessment. Learning is situated and a transitional process, hence validation can help the actors to make prior learning visible and to strengthen self-confidence for future learning achievements. Based on the piloting, it can be said that the transformative goal in validation may have a meaning especially to those adult learners in VET who return to education from working life or to those who are changing careers. Transformative validation could also motivate younger learners who have learning from experience through evening and weekend jobs. Students may have adopted low self-confidence as learners due to negative experiences from education. Policies and practices that show appreciation to learning from experience may develop a learning culture where actors work for the transformative goal in validation. This may increase further the motivation to study and reduce dropping out of VET. The quality criteria in the Nordic quality model prompt the actors to maintain focus on skills and competencies from working life, not only on educational targets and educational curricula.

The Nordic countries are known for their commitment for providing education and learning opportunities for all, including adults. The learner is in the centre of the educational process, as in the quality model. Lifelong learning is seen as a way for progress both for the individual and for the society at large. These values are also represented in the cases selected for the research. The research may give further implications for the interplay between the Nordic quality model of validation and the communities and societies where it will be applied.

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