

European Inventory on Validation of Non- formal and Informal Learning 2010

Case Study: Validation of prior learning: a stepping stone for the reintegration of inmates into society (Norway)

By Claire Duchemin

CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION.....	1
2	AIMS, OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES.....	1
3	PILOTING VALIDATION TO SUPPORT PRISONERS	2
4	RESULTS, OUTCOMES AND IMPACT	3
5	SUCCESS FACTORS	5
6	CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED AND LESSONS LEARNED.....	6
7	CONCLUSIONS.....	6
8	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	8

1 INTRODUCTION

The three-year project 'Validation of prior learning in prison education' (March 2007-December 2009) was developed simultaneously in five Norwegian counties (Østfold, Vestfold, Hordaland, Møre og Romsdal and Sør-Trøndelag). It was led in each case by one prison and one upper secondary school. It aimed to use validation of prior learning (VPL) to provide inmates with an education that is adapted to their backgrounds and needs.

Education and training is considered in Norway to be a key element in prison rehabilitation efforts. As prison education should be on par with education and training in the rest of society, it is thought that it should also keep pace with recent developments, such as VPL.

In Norway, all adults have a statutory right to an assessment of their formal, informal and non-formal learning acquired through the education system, paid and unpaid work and other activities (corresponding to the concept of *realkompetanse*) and to the certification of this prior learning.¹ Each year, about 3-4,000 persons in Norway benefit from the validation of prior learning for the purpose of obtaining a craft certificate and around 40 % of all adult applicants to upper secondary education underwent a validation procedure in 2008.² However, until recently this mechanism has been seldom used within prison education.

This project was set up in response to a 2005 White Paper from the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research on prison education. The paper recommends that an initial assessment of prior learning should be used in prison schools to form the basis for the preparation of individual plans for education and/or training. It also recommends that prisons without a school should make arrangements for validating prior learning. The paper set out the intention to implement a pilot project for validating prior learning of inmates based on the principle of adapted education.

The pilot project was initiated by the [County Governor of Hordaland](#) (the authority responsible for prison education in Norway) and the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training which provided funding. [Vox](#), the Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning (an agency of the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research) held overall responsibility for coordinating the project. Vox was chosen to coordinate the project as an authority on the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning and on the statutory rights of adults to basic education in Norway.

Vox and the County Governor of Hordaland invited five upper secondary schools and associated prisons to participate. The six prisons involved in the project (Ravneberget, Berg, Sem, Bergen, Hustad and Trondheim), which had a total capacity of 596 inmates, represented a balance between low and high security prisons, small and large prisons and comprised both male and female inmates. Representatives of the local office of Norwegian Welfare and Labour administration were also involved in the implementation of the project.

2 AIMS, OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES

The target group for the project was composed of all inmates in the six participating prisons without upper secondary or vocational qualifications. In Norway, education and training offered to inmates is mostly at upper secondary level. The introduction of procedures to validate learning up to this level aimed to improve opportunities for prisoners without upper

¹ Education Act, chapter 4A, <http://www.regjeringen.no/en/doc/Laws/Acts/education-act.html?id=213315>

² The Vox Mirror 2009, p.15, http://www.vox.no/upload/7322/VOX_mirror_2009_web.pdf

secondary or vocational qualifications, to motivate them to take up further education and improve their employability and possibilities to reintegrate into society.

In order to reach this objective, the project aimed specifically to:

- Strengthen cooperation between school authorities, prison and probation services and the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration,
- Increase competences in VPL among prison teachers and staff,
- Use VPL procedures as a starting point to develop individualised training plans within prison education,
- Produce relevant documentation and evaluation of the activities.

The initial phase of the project, which lasted from about six months to one year across the different local projects, was devoted to the planning and preparation of VPL procedures as well as raising awareness about the interest of VPL for the specific target group. This involved:

- Contacts with educational institutions and county administrations responsible for VPL;
- Training of staff working in prison education, teachers and workshop instructors and other categories of prison staff about VPL;
- Dissemination of information to inmates about VPL.

The second step included the establishment of internal routines for the VPL procedure and the start of the validation. The characteristics of the validation process are detailed in the following section of the case study.

3 PILOTING VALIDATION TO SUPPORT PRISONERS

Before the project started, vocational testing and validation of non-formal and informal learning was still little used within prison education in Norway. For instance, in Trondheim prison, although VPL had been used previously it was on a very limited scale.

The project partners recognised that VPL presents a special interest for inmates:

- An important proportion of inmates has left school without any qualification;
- About 70-80% of inmates have some professional experience despite their lack of formal qualifications (e.g. in building, painting) which could be formally recognised; in addition, their relevant professional experience in the informal economy (undeclared work) can also be recognised through VPL;
- The practical dimension of VPL makes it an achievable goal for inmates, who are not always motivated to undertake education and training in formal learning contexts. VPL can also allow a substantial reduction of the time needed to achieve a certificate; applicants who have worked for more than five years do not need for example to take general courses (such as maths or languages) but only courses specific to their trade.

A key dimension of the project consisted in taking account of the specific characteristics of inmates and their backgrounds. One of the main outcomes of the project was the development of adequate information material (such as brochures and posters) specially targeted at inmates, to raise their interest in VPL and inform them about the different steps it entails. Material was developed in English as well as Norwegian, with a view to reaching out to foreign inmates, who represent a significant part (approximately one third)

of the prison population in Norway. In addition, in the Trondheim prison for example, face-to-face meetings were organised with the inmates, as well as with their family members, associations for inmates, etc. to identify their individual potential to participate in VPL.

After the initial awareness-raising activities, the next step was to develop stable procedures and routines for validation. During the initial phase of implementation, project leaders established contacts with the relevant local education authorities to obtain information about the routines used for VPL in general (outside prison education).

The methodology used for validation by the project followed the national framework for VPL and therefore the process implemented by the project involved the assessment of the individual's competences in relation to the national curriculum. All candidates had to apply for a VPL either in vocational or general education and to present all available formal documentation to attest their prior learning and experiences. Participating prisons and upper secondary schools established stable procedures for VPL built on a similar structure:

1. Provision of information and guidance;
2. Mapping of competences, collection of relevant documents
3. Validation: Usually a dialogue-based method including an interview where background, training, work experience, language skills and objectives of the candidates are assessed during interviews, which can be completed by the assessment of written documentation, photos etc. The validation may also include vocational testing, which is a test of the candidate's practical abilities and expertise assessed by a specialised validation practitioner, based on national curricula
4. Development of adapted education/tailored training (e.g. additional education required to achieve a trade certificate).

However, the actual methods used might slightly differ at local level.

A major task in the establishment of the procedures was the identification of practitioners who could carry out the validation in each different field. In Norway, there are no centralised requirements for qualifications of validation practitioners. In the case of the prison of Trondheim, validation practitioners were mainly identified outside the prison staff and school departments, while it was expected that teachers and instructors working in prison could perform the evaluation themselves.

4 RESULTS, OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

An internal evaluation report has been produced³; in addition, the project has also been evaluated by an external, independent evaluator.⁴ This section briefly discusses the results of the project for the target group, as well as for the partners involved. It also assesses the transferability of the experience and describes some of the general outcomes identified, on the basis of information provided by interviewed stakeholders and partly based on the findings of the internal project evaluation.

Outcomes of the project for inmates

³ Alfsen, Hanssen, Ramstad (2010), *Din tur til å bevise Realkompetansevurdering i opplæringen innenfor kriminalomsorgen (2007-2009) Sluttrapport*. Rapport nr. 2/10 Fylkesmannen i Hordaland

⁴ Oxford Research (2010), *Med blikket rettet fremover, Sluttrapport for evaluering av realkompetanseprosjektet innenfor Kriminalomsorgen*

As mentioned above, it has been recognised by project partners that VPL presents a special interest for inmates. Inmates were very often not aware that their work experience could be acknowledged and were keen to apply for VPL. Altogether, 186 prisoners have been assessed during the project period, representing about one third of all inmates in the five participating prisons. VPL has been first and foremost used within vocational education, rather than general education, in line with the past experiences and expectations of inmates.

As a result, a small number have received a trade/craft certificate so far but many other candidates have shortened their study period in order to acquire a trade certificate over a period of 1.5 or 2 years.

One example of success story is Peter, an inmate who could no longer work in the health care sector because he had committed a drug-related crime related at work. As Peter also had significant experience in carpentry (both acquired during different short-term jobs as a non-qualified carpenter and in his free time), Peter applied for VPL in order to get his skills recognised.

VPL allowed Peter to achieve his certificate in only six months instead of four years. Peter's experience was assessed against the national curriculum for carpentry, based on his practical abilities. In his case, the validation process was also facilitated by the fact that he had documents to certificate his professional experience as a non-skilled carpenter and pictures showing how he had built his own home. He then completed his curriculum to become a fully-skilled carpenter by working on the shop floor in prison. Peter is now out of prison, working as a skilled carpenter.

Capacity-building within involved prisons and school departments

Through the project, commitment and interest in VPL has been raised across the participating organisations from both the schools departments and the other prison departments. The partners have concluded that VPL is an appropriate method for many prisoners and have built up experience and competences in this field: the prison staff is now able to inform inmates about where they can get further information about VPL; and some of the teachers in prison have qualified to take part in the validation process.

The school departments in each prison have also cooperated to establish cooperation routines with job training personnel in prison, the upper secondary school, county administration and the Norwegian Labour and Welfare administration.

Another very important outcome of the project is to facilitate the access to information about VPL as a result of joint working. Information material targeted towards inmates as validation applicants has been designed and made use of in the second phase of the project.

Transferability of the experience and impact on the development of VPL in prison education in Norway

During the implementation of the project, the number of VPL procedures performed in all Norwegian prisons has increased. According to the project coordinator, this could partly be considered as an outcome of this innovative project: information about activities carried out within the five participating prisons was largely disseminated to various stakeholders involved in prison education in Norway through relevant arenas.

It is also considered that the success of the project at the local level and the competences acquired by project team members set the foundations for the follow-up process; creating a basis for further work in establishing VPL in prison education at national level in Norway. As a direct follow-up of this project, the County Governor of Hordaland, together with the

Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, is planning to promote a more systematic development of VPL in all prisons in Norway starting in 2011.

In addition, the outcomes of the project were disseminated at EU level (e.g. during a European conference on prison education⁵) to promote the development of VPL for prisoners.

5 SUCCESS FACTORS

First and foremost, this project has been made possible by favourable developments in the field of VPL at national and local level in Norway. The existence of a national methodological framework for VPL ensured that the results of validation are highly trusted in general as well as among project partners. The existence of locally well-established validation procedures also facilitated implementation. Some of the prisons involved had an earlier experience of VPL, which facilitated to a certain extent the implementation of the project.

The genuine interest among inmates in VPL is obviously a key success factor. Through the project, many participants have learned that their work experience was also of value. In order to generate interest, appropriate information channels, easy access to information and efforts to raise awareness about the benefits of VPL played a major role in the success of the project, as the initial level of knowledge about this procedure among inmates was very low. In addition, it is estimated that exchanges between inmates themselves have significantly contributed to raising participation rates.

It was reported that inmates' success stories (such as the case of Peter, presented above) had a very high impact in terms of motivation of staff: even if only a few inmates have already obtained their trade certificate, it was felt this was worth the efforts engaged, in terms of reintegration of inmates of society and preventing further criminal behaviour.

The exchange of experience between the different local projects, opportunities for networking and role of the coordinating body also had a strong positive impact on the development of each project.

The project coordinator, Vox, organised meetings with local project leaders each trimester and with all project team members each semester to discuss issues raised by participants. These meetings allowed Vox, the involved projects and other actors involved in VPL in Norway to share their experiences. It can be assumed that the local projects would not have been as successful if they had been implemented independently.

Local project partners also considered that this exchange process was very useful to compare practices and challenges; and that it contributed to reinforcing the homogeneity of practices among the five prisons involved. For instance, developing appropriate information material was a common challenge for all project teams; as one team was particularly successful in this regard, other prisons decided to use the same material.

Project partners also acknowledged the important coordinating role played by Vox. It acted as a useful 'collector of ideas' and helped to instigate the kick-off of the project: participants were given advice on how to start and project leaders followed specific training in project leadership and planning provided by Vox.

⁵ See <http://ec.europa.eu/education/grundtvig/doc/conf11/wa4/hippo.pdf>

Central coordination also had a positive impact on the motivation of participants and in particular project leaders, who assumed a large responsibility on the ground. Regular meetings have provided efficient support for the partners involved and contributed to turning individual activities into a collective project.

6 CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED AND LESSONS LEARNED

Overall, the experience of actors involved seems to suggest that the establishment of validation procedures in prisons did not differ to a very large extent from the development of similar measures for other target groups: typical challenges for the success of VPL such as awareness-raising, adequate training for staff as well as identifying validation practitioners and establishing stable procedures and routines also applied to this case.

Challenges faced by some of the project teams during the early stages of the project included:

- the lack of standard, clear procedures and routines for VPL or guidance established at the county level and difficulty to identify good practice in VPL that could be used as a model within the context of prison education
- a limited capacity for instructors working in prison workshops to perform the validation themselves
- a difficulty to identify available practitioners who could perform the validation in rural, less populated areas

In addition, project partners interviewed for this case study stressed the crucial role of information and dissemination about the project activities. The initial level of awareness among inmates about VPL was generally very low but the information about VPL given by prison staff and teachers has been well received.

However, these challenges have delayed, but not impeded the practical implementation of VPL procedures. In the case of the prison of Hustad, project team members had to carry out new activities related to VPL, which turned out to require more time than expected, on top of their regular tasks. It was felt that the allocation of additional specific resources devoted to VPL from the start (e.g. allocating one part-time post during the implementation of the project) would have significantly facilitated the development of the project.

In addition, the limited duration of the allocation of resources also appeared to be a more general challenge. Once the project ended, no extra funding was attributed for the follow-up of VPL activities in the five prisons involved. Project partners, while acknowledging that the need for specific resources dedicated to VPL is less important once stable procedures are put in place, called for more permanent resources to ensure the sustainability of these activities.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The project implemented in the five prisons has achieved very successful results, with 186 participants assessed during the two last years of the project.

Typical challenges for the success of VPL such as awareness-raising, adequate training of involved staff as well as identifying validation practitioners and establishing stable procedures and routines also apply to the case of VPL for inmates. The methodology used for the assessment did not differ from the methods used for other target groups and

included different methods such as dialogue, assessment of documentation and practical vocational testing against national curricula.

An evaluation of the project⁶ has highlighted the crucial importance of the following aspects:

- Informing teachers and workshop instructors in prison and all new employees and prison personnel as well as new inmates,
- Training of the personnel working in prison education or with work training (e.g. to be trained as evaluators),
- Procedures and internal routines for the entire validation procedure (information/guidance, competence mapping, validation/assessment, documentation, tailored training/adapted education),
- Collaboration and networking between prisons and other partners who can contribute to the validation work (e.g. Labour and Welfare Service),
- Financial allocation to earmark for validation activities.

Through its implementation, the initial assumption guiding this project, i.e. that VPL can hold important benefits for inmates and respond to their needs by facilitating significantly their access to qualifications, was largely confirmed. The project has therefore contributed to anchoring VPL as an integral part of prison education in Norway.

As a direct follow-up to this project, the County Governor of Hordaland (the authority responsible for prison education in Norway) is now planning to implement VPL on a large scale in all prisons in the country, in cooperation with the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. This new phase in the development of VPL in prisons may start in 2011.

A lesson from this project is that the successful implementation of VPL for inmates has relied on the active involvement of local actors such as prison staff, prison school departments and upper secondary schools. Project participants also recognised the important role played by the coordinator Vox, the Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning, as a success factor.

As VPL is still a new practice within prison education, it was important to allocate sufficient and sustainable resources to create stable and efficient routines for VPL in prison, as well as to build trust and establish information channels. This is all the more important in small structures where actors might not have any experience of VPL. In an initial phase, specific training in project leadership and planning for project leaders also helped local project leaders.

Exchange of information, networking and mutual learning will be a very important pillar of this new development phase of the project.

⁶ Oxford Research (2010), *Med blikket rettet fremover, Sluttrapport for evaluering av realkompetanseprosjektet innenfor Kriminalomsorgen*

8 BIBLIOGRAPHY

Literature:

Alfsen Camilla, Vox, *How Individual Pathways are Possible for Offenders*, presentation prepared for the European Conference on Prison Education 'Pathways to inclusion – Strengthening European Cooperation in Prison Education and Training', Budapest, 22-24 February 2010

<http://ec.europa.eu/education/grundtvig/doc/conf11/wa4/hippo.pdf>

Alfsen, Hanssen, Ramstad (2010): *"Din tur til å bevise" Realkompetansevurdering i opplæringen innenfor kriminalomsorgen (2007-2009) Sluttrapport*. Rapport nr. 2/10 Fylkesmannen i Hordaland

Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, *Education and Training in the Correctional Services, "Another Spring"*, 2005

[http://www.epea.org/images/pdf/AnotherSpring\(Norway\).pdf](http://www.epea.org/images/pdf/AnotherSpring(Norway).pdf)

Oxford Research (2010), *Med blikket rettet fremover, Sluttrapport for evaluering av realkompetanseprosjektet innenfor Kriminalomsorgen*

Vox (2009), *The Vox Mirror 2009*

http://www.vox.no/upload/7322/VOX_mirror_2009_web.pdf

Websites:

Website of Vox:

<http://www.vox.no>

Stakeholders consulted:

Leader of the project implemented between Romsdal upper secondary school and Hustad prison (interviewed 17/09/10)

Senior adviser, Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training and previously coordinator of the project at Vox (interviewed 23/09/10)

Teacher involved in the project implemented between Brundalen upper secondary school and Trondheim prison (interviewed 30/09/10)