

## ***Finland: Validation in a Volunteering Context***

### **Type of provider**

Sivis Study Centre, a nationwide provider of non-formal adult education provides education in cooperation with member organisations: courses, lectures, study groups and projects. Recent projects include Volunteering Validation Highway and Destination eValidation, on the use of electronic tools in validating learning through volunteering.

### **Objectives**

Validation in a volunteering context: what do volunteers learn in their tasks and at what level of difficulty? Volunteers can use what they have learnt in formal education or when looking for a job. Validation is also useful for other voluntary organisations.

### **Assessment approaches**

Electronic tools and platforms. Comparing volunteers and supervisors' answers. Feedback from supervisors or peers. Validated portfolio (of informal learning).

### **Target Group**

1. NGOs that work with volunteers
2. volunteers

### **Potential transferability/ scalability**

The transferability of e-tools is good, though they are not always picked up by the group that needs them the most. Younger people may be more willing and able to use digital tools, although long-term volunteers are often older. A question of resources: the organisation receives financing from the Ministry of Education and is involved in European projects. Pan-European tools do not automatically serve every country equally.

### **Summaries or Basic elements of analysis**

Validation of learning through volunteering. Uses electronic tools, collects feedback and compares volunteers and supervisors' answers. There is a model recommendation letter, which a volunteer can attach to job application. Not all volunteers use the accreditation for work purposes; volunteers may have ideological or highly personal reasons for volunteering. Validation can boost confidence and make the volunteer feel useful.

## Introduction in keywords

- Validation in a Volunteering Context
- Finland
- electronic tools, platforms, portfolios
- validating learning through volunteering
- a variety of skills: technical, managerial, people skills...
- feedback from supervisors, peers

## 5 areas descriptive text

### Organisation and Description of the tool(s) (which skills are assessed)

Sivis Study Centre provides, in cooperation with its member organisations, non-formal adult education, organising courses, lectures, study groups and projects. The study centre offers training for trainers and publishes learning materials. It serves people who work with volunteers, or run or work for NGOs by helping them in pedagogical planning, quality management and collecting feedback. Its member organisations represent a variety of fields, from health to education and culture. With five offices from Helsinki to Oulu, Sivis operates nationwide.

Two recent European projects include Volunteering Validation Highway and Destination eValidation (VVH and DesTeVa), on validation in a volunteering context. When asked about what they had learnt, especially Finnish volunteers cited technical and managerial skills before other skills. "Of course then they mention, oh yes, I've learnt to relate to other people, as well," says Marion Fields. As a specialist working for Sivis Study Centre, Fields has been strongly involved in both projects.

### Implementation (how the tool is used, how the assessors are trained, how often it is used)

VVH and DesTeVa ran between 2013 and 2016. As a result, an e-learning platform now exists. Although the projects have ended, the tools are still promoted, and a methodology for what validation is in a volunteering context is being developed. The aim was to collect and exchange information about the use of social media and online tools in validating learning through volunteering in the participating countries. They also did a "matching experience", comparing volunteers and their supervisors' answers to the same questions; what had the volunteers learnt and at what level?

The e-platforms make use of written applications, with reflection questions and users submitting examples of their work. After answering general questions, the tool suggests a level on which the learning has taken place. At each level, there are clarifying guidance questions: in what context have you used this? How

confident do you feel in using it? The questions focus on knowledge, skills and attitude. There are also systems of peer assessment, both in use and in the making, where other volunteers and supervisors assess the volunteer's skills. "When you want to assess if someone's done well in a volunteering context, you need to ask many more people, because it's all about collective effort," Fields maintains. The volunteer then gets a validated portfolio of informal learning.

As the organisation has an accumulative membership of over one million people and does not directly work with volunteers in the field, their focus is on training volunteer supervisors, who can do the assessment. This occurs through teamwork, with knowledge and skills that complement each other. If one employee has a background in research and knows the policy context, another has experience from supervising learners.

## Description of the target groups

Inclusiveness is in many ways in-built in volunteering, both because of the work that is done and because of the people who perform it. Many volunteers belong to marginalised groups themselves; they may suffer from an illness, be unemployed or no longer be in working life. Sometimes having a personal connection to something is the reason for volunteering.

Sivis works with disability organisations and must thus make accessible websites. Their tools also function as encouragement for learners and users who are underrepresented in adult education. In practice, although the tools are promoted for one group, the people who take them up are not necessarily the ones who need to be included the most. Especially in the past few years, Sivis has worked more with migrants, although the study centre has offered Finnish language tuition before.

## Policy context

The Association for Educational Activities maintains Sivis Study Centre, with the Ministry of Education and the Finnish National Agency for Education monitoring the educational services it provides. The ministry is also involved in the funding of the study centre. Although some study centres – there are a dozen in Finland – have links to political parties or trade unions, Sivis' member organisations are politically independent. The Liberal Adult Education Act (1998/632) provides the framework for its activities.

Sivis coordinated VVH, working with partners from seven other countries. It was followed by DesTeVa, an Erasmus project that involved many of the same partners, coordinated from Germany with the IT partners in Bulgaria. For the latter project, they incorporated all the countries' NQFs into the framework for the electronic assessment platform, comparing the national frameworks to each other and to the EQF. This could be developed further. Fields states: "We've noticed that a pan-European tool does not serve all countries equally. (...) You can then either have a sort of EU neutral way of doing it (...) or if you come from Finland, there will be a few extra assessment questions for the context of Finland."

## Impact for assesses

One of the findings of the VVH project was that not all volunteers were familiar with (or interested in) using social media to promote their skills. Younger people may also be more comfortable with using digital tools, yet long-term volunteers are often older. Nevertheless, learning is undoubtedly accumulated through volunteering, and volunteers can make use of their experiences later on in formal education or when looking for a job. For instance, one very concrete result of the projects is a model recommendation letter, which the volunteer can attach to a job application. Volunteering is also about making connections. Not all the people you are connected with on LinkedIn necessarily have to know you from work.

“We live in a society, in societies where skills become perhaps (...) even more valuable than (...) certain credentials,” says Fields, who likes to define competence as getting things done. Many volunteers do not have years of prior education, but have these skills. In countries with high unemployment or youth unemployment, this type of validation of voluntary work, but also of other non-formal or informal learning and activities, could be a way of making candidates more competitive on the job market. It is also useful for organisations, as it saves them from putting their new volunteers in basic training courses, if they already have that knowledge from prior voluntary work.

Yet this kind of validation – and if and in what context the volunteer chooses to share whatever badge or portfolio they have gained – needs to be opt-in. There are many reasons for volunteering, not all of them utilitarian. If somebody volunteers in a very sensitive position, or does it for highly personal reasons, they may be unable or unwilling to share the exact details with employers. Volunteering also boosts your self-esteem. For people with a chronic illness, volunteering can be a way of being included in society. They both feel like they are doing something useful and can show others that they are useful. Whether you get a job or find a place to study, you have these validated skills. “It shows that they’re all (...) valuable people,” Fields concludes.



***<https://www.ok-sivis.fi/sivis-study-centre.html>***  
***[http://validationforvolunteers.eu/online\\_tool](http://validationforvolunteers.eu/online_tool)***