

Volunteering in the VPL perspective

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Managing European diversity in lifelong learning (Valuing Prior Learning, VPL 2) aims at “{...} strengthening the use of validation of non-formal and informal learning for both summative and formative purposes in a qualitative and quantitative sense: more use of the validation principles by individuals and organisations, supported by a more demand-steered and customer-oriented learning system {...}”. Three sectoral levels have been chosen: profit sector (metal), non-profit sector (health) and voluntary sector (unpaid work). This article is focussed on the ways the VPL2 project has contributed to enhance volunteering as a key issue in Valuing Prior Learning and how far volunteering can bring an added-value to the labour market, social cohesion and active citizenship, in the society of competence.

1. VPL 2 in the context of the Copenhagen process

VPL 2 is a pilot project Leonardo da Vinci, a European programme meant to enhance life long learning, integrating all the dimensions of a human being in the education process: school, family, volunteering or any social activity performed.

With the Copenhagen process, the Leonardo da Vinci (LdV) programme has acquired a clearer political background and has indeed been mentioned as a tool for proceeding towards the goals set in 2002, by the Education Ministers of 31 countries and the European Commission who adopted the “Copenhagen Declaration” meant to enhance cooperation in European vocational education and training.

The goals of the Copenhagen process are, by means of increasing cooperation, to improve the quality of vocational education, to increase the attractiveness of vocational education and to improve the mobility of those in and graduated from vocational education. One of the eight points emphasized by the Copenhagen Declaration was “recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning”.

These two notions seem to be very close. The European Centre for Development of Vocational training issues (Cedefop) gave precious definitions for those two notions. “Informal learning” results from “{...} daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional or non-intentional (or incidental/random) {...}.” (1) This last characteristic is the main difference with the “non formal learning” which is “{...} embedded in planned activities that are not explicitly designated as learning, but which contain an important learning element (something described as semi-structured learning). It is intentional from the learner’s perspective. Non formal learning does not lead to certification {...}”(1)

In this perspective, volunteering belongs to both non formal and informal learning. Voluntary experience has already been recognised as a main key issue in the Copenhagen process. In Helsinki, in December 2006, the Finnish presidency organised an informal Ministerial Meeting as a follow-up of the process started in 2002 during the Danish presidency. This meeting evaluated the implementation and reviewed the priorities and strategies for European cooperation in Vocational and Education Training (VET).

A former Leonardo da Vinci project (2000-2006) initiated by the Institute for Research and Information on Volunteering (Iriv, France) was rewarded on this occasion as the ten best European pilot projects among 157 in 27 countries for its contribution to the Copenhagen process for recognition of non formal and informal learning. The main goal of the French project was to propose a portfolio and a guide to assess voluntary experience (AVE) in a professional perspective (2).

The main perspective both for the VPL 2 and AVE projects are to enhance Vocational and Education Training (VET) practices and to strengthen European transnational co-operation in order to implement the “Education and Training 2010” programme and contribute to the achievement of the goals stated by the European Council held in Lisbon on 2000 according to which “*{...} the Union must become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion {...}*” (3).

2. Volunteering, a key issue in the life long learning process

Cedefop has given a precise definition for lifelong learning : “*{...} all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective{...}*” (1).

A very important issue in the life long learning process is the acquisition of competences. In a recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council, of December 2006, on key competences for lifelong learning, it is stated that “*{...} key competences in the shape of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to each context are fundamental for each individual in a knowledge-based society. They provide added value for the labour market, social cohesion and active citizenship by offering flexibility and adaptability, satisfaction and motivation {...}*” (4).

Because they should be acquired by everyone, the recommendation proposes a reference tool for the Member States to ensure that these key competences are fully integrated into their strategies and infrastructures, particularly in the context of lifelong learning. The acquisition of key competences “*{...} fits in with the principles of equality and access for all. This reference framework also applies in particular to disadvantaged groups whose educational potential requires support. Examples of such groups include people with low basic skills, early school leavers, the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities or migrants, etc. {...}*” (4). .

Both projects VPL 2 and AVE have contributed to propose a method (analysis grid for VPL, portfolio for AVE) to value or assess a voluntary experience and enhance this specific way to acquire key competences.

VPL 2 stands for Valuation of Prior Learning. It aims at recognition, accreditation/validation and further development of what an individual has learned in every possible learning environment: formal environments such as school and non-formal or informal environments such as the working place, at home or in associations. AVE means Assessing Voluntary Experience in a professional perspective. It aims at identifying, evaluating and assessing skills and competences acquired through volunteering as an informal learning for a professional purpose.

The VPL 2 project is broader in its perspectives as all the fields of individuals’ activities are concerned (personal, professional, social) and all the economic sectors (public, private, non profit). The AVE project is focussed on the skills and competences acquired in the voluntary sector (non profit sector) in the framework of the individuals’ social activities.

Lifelong learning is both a personal and institutional process. Without the help of official bodies, skills and competences acquired in non classical areas wouldn’t be valued on the labour market. VPL 2 should “*{...} enforce the empowerment of individuals and organisations in Europe’s knowledge-society as well as making the learning system itself more demand-driven and customer-oriented {...}*”. In the AVE project, professionals from associations, public authorities and national agency for employment have experimented the portfolio.

The institutional context is an important issue. In France, a law was adopted in January 2002, called the “social modernisation act”. It is quite a pioneer legislation in the context of assessing formal and informal learning. It is stated that part or the totality of a diploma or certification could be obtained through “valuing prior learning”. It is clearly mentioned “paid staff activity”, “non-paid activity”, and “voluntary activity”. The main condition is to justify by three years of activity linked to the field of the diploma or certification asked for. This is an active and quite demanding process but it has opened doors to many people without diploma to value their professional experience.

As focussed by Anne-Marie Charraud in the first VPL project “*{...}The law of January 2002 has had significant impact on the world of vocational training. Best known for its amendment of the VAE tool called Validation des acquis professionnels (Validation of Vocational Achievement) in 1992, it has allowed genuine progress in the principle of “lifelong learning”. By focussing on “certification” and no longer on training, the emphasis is now for young people and adults to demonstrate their achievements and qualifications after experience as well as training {...}*” (5).

Both projects are labour market oriented: VPL 2 speaks about “employability”, AVE is meant to renew with a professional activity, it can be direct (employment) or more indirect (employability). In this perspective, the main goal to integrate the non profit sector in the VPL process is to recognise volunteering as a key issue in lifelong learning: a voluntary experience may help individuals to value skills and competences out of the usual places (school and workplace).

Volunteering contributes a great deal to the building of the so-called society of competence in three different ways: on the labour market, in social cohesion, for active citizenship.

Diagram presenting the AVE project

3. Volunteering and the labour market

First of all, it is important to remind of the definition of volunteering. Generally five dimensions are referred to in definitions (6):

- a. the activity should be carried out of one's own will (free choice) ;
- b. It is a work unpaid, unremunerated (without monetary compensation) ;
- c. It serves the common purpose ;
- d. It must not only be for the benefit of the individual or his or her family ;
- e. It is usually in associations or non profit organisations but it can also take place in an informal frame.

When thinking about volunteering, it is important to look at the relationship between volunteering and paid work in three perspectives: effects of changes in work on volunteering, differences and similarities between volunteering and paid work, the relationship between paid work and volunteering on a political level.

The profile of conventional work has been subject to many changes. Stable full-time wage employment is decreasing. The trend is towards more flexible forms of work, such as self-employment or traditional "atypical" work (short-term jobs, jobs with just a few hours a week etc.). Also working times are decreasing (even though the last legislations in Europe seem to have stopped this trend) as well as becoming more flexible. In a positive approach, this means that volunteering is becoming relevant as a "building block" in a flexible work biography. On the other hand, it also means that people do not have a stable income and thus are forced to focus on different types of paid work rather than volunteering.

Negative aspects prescribed to the relationship between volunteering and work are fears that - especially in social services - volunteers should act as a "job killers". Sometimes, boundaries between volunteering and precarious, low paid jobs, are not so clear. Low paid jobs could be "disguised" as volunteering. The difficulty of identifying the differences between volunteering and precarious jobs is connected with how much payments linked to volunteering (such as reimbursement of costs) are accepted and usual in the respective countries. Also there is the fear that promoting volunteering might lead to pushing women out of paid work and thus out of the labour market.

There is little empirical evidence proving the "job killer" theory. On the contrary, the quantitative impact of being a bridge between non-work and paid work has been shown especially in the social, environment or cultural fields. Volunteers have played a major role to identify needs and create paid jobs, for instance in France, specific jobs were created between 1997 and 2002, (the so-called "emplois-jeunes" promoted under Lionel Jospin's socialist government). Since 2002, some initiatives have been promoted to create jobs in the social economy, most of the time with a public support. Volunteers have been pioneers in finding new areas to create new kinds of jobs (7).

One major controversial topic remains the relationship between unemployment and volunteering. A great deal of hope is being projected onto volunteering as a way of occupying, but also qualifying unemployed people. There is empirical evidence that unemployed people tend to volunteer less than those employed and that at least currently - in quantitative terms - volunteering contributes little to improving the dilemma of unemployment. Also, programmes prescribing social or environmental work to the long-term unemployed, such as "New Deal" in the United Kingdom, "Integra" in Austria (6) are frequently mixed-up with those offering incentives to the unemployed to volunteer. Drawing clear distinctions between these two fields is very important with respect to the centrality of free-choice in the definition of volunteering. Volunteering shouldn't be considered as compulsory social work. Such initiative has been clearly denounced for instance in France, in the nineties, when the executive manager of the National agency for unemployment (ANPE) suggested that unemployed people should dedicate part of their time to volunteering. A social counsellor of president Jacques Chirac strongly reacted, at the time, against this surprising proposal.

Positive facets attributed to volunteering are the possibility to act as a bridge to a paid job for women, people who are unemployed or other disadvantaged groups on the labour market as a field of formal and informal learning. From a qualitative, individual perspective, being involved as a volunteer can help unemployed people gain competencies, contacts and thus can be a stepping stone towards paid employment. Not only do many European countries lack incentives for unemployed people to volunteer, they could also provide barriers for this kind of initiative. These countries either have laws prohibiting people receiving unemployment benefits from volunteering and/or unclear or wrong information is provided by employment offices. The idea is that volunteering shouldn't prevent unemployed people from looking for job opportunities. So it is not a total prohibition. On the contrary, many national agencies for employment have insisted on the positive impact of volunteering on unemployed people, to meet people, to build networks, to experience new skills or better know new fields of activity.

In the context of the VPL2 project, some examples, in the French context, have focussed on this last point. A regional project has been developed in Ile de France, between 2003 and 2006, called "Assessing voluntary experience in Aria", an association defending soldiers' families' interests. Funded by the Social Action Department of the French Ministry for Defence and the European Social Fund, this project aimed at accompanying unemployed women, soldiers' wives, faced to the mobility of their husbands (8).

The average profile of these women was 50 year old, with three children, old enough to take care of themselves. Most of these women have had only voluntary experience. The first year was dedicated to identify the skills and competences they could really use on the labour market. They had to remind their volunteer's biography, then to build up their curriculum vitae on this basis. The work in team has been quite useful to express these specific competences as their first attitude was to deny any kind of skills developed in their volunteering. The second year was meant to face the labour market and to meet professionals of human resources to be aware of the reality of the labour market. A guide of interview was built. The curriculum vitae was also corrected on the basis of the job opportunities they could find. In small groups, they could exchange their different professional experiences. The third year was concerned with opening the tool and method proposed to any volunteer seeking a job, with one characteristic: being faced with mobility. A new association, mostly composed of women joined Aria's team. A portfolio was built integrating all the different aspects of the process : characterising one's own volunteer's experience, expressing the missions/activities fulfilled, identifying the skills and competences, making a link with the labour market (direct access, a training proposed, a classical VAE with a certification at the end).

The results of these three year project have been quite fruitful. Twenty volunteers started the project in 2003; twelve of them came to an end in 2006; seven volunteers found a job between 2004 and 2007. Two of the volunteers (the youngest) passed an exam to enter the public administration (Ministry of Defence to be a secretary, Ministry of Education to become a teacher), two were hired in private schools to look after pupils or foreign students, two are now employed by a local authority (to deal with art workshop) and a University (as a secretary), the treasurer of the association found a job as accountant in a religious organisation. The list is not complete as the other volunteers are still seeking for a job. All the volunteers have insisted on the very positive impact of the project on their self-confidence and their self-esteem. The years spent for their voluntary experience suddenly appeared in a professional and positive perspective.

Towards the Ministry of Defence, quite involved in the social and economic welfare of soldiers' families, the project was also a very good one. The project coincided with the creation of an employment service among the human resources department (the "Cellule d'accompagnement des conjoints-CAEC"). Many studies have been realised these past ten years on the incomes of soldiers' families. Most of them, even with the higher revenues, couldn't afford only one income. The traditional profile of wives' soldiers is no more a woman staying at home for raising her numerous children. But for those of fifty years who married young and wouldn't have any professional experience, assessing prior learning and mostly a voluntary experience should be a very useful opportunity.

This French case is highly representative of the VPL process. It is both a main interest for the individuals (the volunteers) and the Institution (Association and Ministry) to value prior learning: it is a way to promote employment and also to value human resources.

2. Volunteering , social cohesion and VPL

The context in which skills and competences are acquired through a voluntary experience is also very important to understand. Some notions need to be precise in this perspective. Volunteering is a key factor in debates on social cohesion, democracy and civil society.

The guiding principle of civil society is volunteerism, while associations are its dominant collective actors. It is seen as a further model of social order next to the community, market and state. The prerequisite for taking part in civil society is commitment i.e. the willingness to bind oneself to a common course and to take responsibilities (Dekker /Van den Broek, 1998) (9).

Distinctive traits of civil society are "social capital" and public discourse. Social capital refers to "*features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit*" (Putnam, 1995) (10). Public discourse is the ability of a society to articulate collective values, to reflect upon social problems and to develop political goals (Wuthnow, 1991) (11). The increasing interest in volunteering and voluntary organizations is closely connected to the expectation of bridging the gap between the citizen and the state.

In traditional economic theories, whether you choose a liberal or Marxist point of view, the focus is made on the State or the Market: the non profit sector is forgotten. Besides, a lot of economic, social or political activities are realised outside the public or private sector (7).

The non-profit sector or third sector has been developed because of a failure of the State and the Market. Needs were expressed by some groups of the population and no solutions or offers were proposed by public authorities nor commercial structures. The main reason is that the population in need can't express clearly its demand towards the public sector and the private sector doesn't see, in the beginning, the interest, in commercial terms, of such a population.

The main characteristic of the third sector is to depend on individual initiatives, most of the time through associations or NGOs, on a voluntary basis. Volunteers accept freely to dedicate their time to defend a cause or/and to be involved in a specific action. To understand the voluntary sector, it is necessary to forget the traditional paradigm of selfishness in economy which can be expressed by: any individual wants to maximise its own utility with a defined budget. The new paradigm is altruism: you are looking for the welfare and wellbeing of others.

On the associations' side, there are two ways to justify the legitimacy of the third sector. They are the result of the social evolution, an expression of the civil society: an original way to solve social problems different from the public way and the private way. They can also be analysed as the extension of institutional powers such as Church, State and Local Authorities: in this sense, the associative vitality is part of a strategy of social control. In both acceptations, the non-profit sector or Third sector personified by the associations is the expression of solidarity on a local and human level. Its goal is not material but immaterial. Its targets are populations in need because of sickness, difficult social background ...

On the volunteers' side, they are the touchstone in the organisations of the third sector, there is no material compensation for their work: they are not paid staff. But there is an immaterial reward; this is

the Latin “*do ut des*” motto: I give to make you (or someone else) give. So this is not pure altruism but quasi-altruism.

British researcher David A. Kennett (1981), proposed six different types of quasi-altruism that correspond to immaterial goals (12) :

- Quasi- altruism with intangible compensation : you give your time to obtain respect from the person who benefits from your gift or from people witness of this gift ;
- Quasi- altruism in the games theory perspective : you give to impress a third person or to make things be positive for you in the future,
- Quasi- altruism in the socio-biology context : you give because your parents or your family have shown you the way, you have received some kind of “altruistic gene” or biologic predestination,
- Quasi- altruism and the Rotten Kid Theorem : in a group, there is a social income which is bigger than all the incomes gathered, if you want to benefit by this synergy you’d better act as a volunteer,
- Quasi- altruism and the social pressure : to avoid social costs and psychological guiltiness, you prefer being a volunteer,
- Quasi- altruism and sponsorship : you give to promote a positive image of you and so a complementary profit in the near future (in your profession, social life)

Most of the time, motivations of volunteers are mixed and unconscious. The main reasons for volunteering given by volunteers themselves are : willing to defend a cause ; willing to use usefully their free time ; meeting people you wouldn’t have the opportunity to meet elsewhere ; acquiring or developing skills and competences ; opening new horizons.

The specificity of the non profit sector and the motivations of the volunteers play a major role in the VPL context. Valuing prior learning is a voluntary process. What should be the use for individuals or the institutions to develop such a process? There could be a major obstacle to VPL due to the characteristics of the non profit sector: the suspicion of unprofessional, amateur activity. There are so many prejudices towards non profit organisations. The third sector shouldn’t be seen as a negative choice beside private sector (firms run by profit in a cost-effectiveness perspective) and public sector (public authorities serving the common purpose). Having a better knowledge of associations is meaningful in this purpose. Knowing the reasons why individuals are volunteering is a key to better identify the meaning of their activity and the context in which it has been developed.

3. Volunteering, active citizenship in a VPL perspective

Skills and competences acquired through volunteering have another specificity. Part of them are personal, other are collective. Being a volunteer means defending a cause and so being an active citizen. Volunteering is a key issue in many fields of social activities as it is the touchstone of associations that have developed in all the European countries since the past thirty years. The International Year for Volunteering celebrated in 2001, by the United Nations, has enhanced the role and importance of volunteering in so many countries in the world (13).

Thanks to the involvement of millions of people in associations, foundations, mutual societies, social cooperatives, volunteering has become a social phenomenon. It is no more an activity devoted to a happy few, the so called “Leisure Class” (14). It is part of ethics.

Being ethical means “*being honest and truthful, responsible and accountable, fair and equitable, respectful and mindful, compassionate and caring*” (15). Confronted to the environmental collapse, the economic disparities, the belligerent militarism, the racial tensions, the gender biases, the religious hatreds, many citizens’ groups put forward education as the solution to solve or at least understand these global issues. Education has a double meaning: education in mind (literacy and numeracy) and in the heart (character, goodness, civility and values).

What could be the meaning of ethics as far as volunteering is concerned? It is one of the main aspects of ethics and the best way to promote innovation and co-operation in many fields of social activities. In many publications of the European Commission, one of the main concerns is to “*raise awareness of the positive contribution made by voluntary work to informal education, particularly for young people*”.

Especially for youth, a voluntary activity can enhance teamwork, participation, solidarity, tolerance and mutual understanding in a multicultural environment. This is very close to the definition of ethics we have given *supra*.

Volunteering gives a moral dimension. The main criteria are not profitability but common purpose. Volunteering is also a transversal approach with education. Voluntary work allows volunteers to develop formal and non-formal skills and qualifications, to improve specific qualities (mutual aid, altruism, cooperative spirit).

Volunteering offers opportunities to take on stimulating work, to develop skills, to explore different careers and to get work experience. Being involved in voluntary experiences enriches one's background, apart from the previous education.

A voluntary work has proved its impact on formal education: volunteers may improve theoretical knowledge acquired at school or acquire new skills or qualifications such as technical skills. Volunteering has also proved its impact on non-formal education: through a voluntary work, volunteers develop informal knowledge such as teamwork, participation, citizenship, solidarity, mutual understanding but also, on a personal level, self esteem and self confidence.

Volunteering is often seen as a negative choice and not as a positive one. It seems to be developed just for reasons of cost saving : most of associations would rely only on voluntary work because they couldn't afford to have paid-staff. This approach is quite restrictive; this is also a matter of ethics.

Assessing voluntary work should be an essential issue for associations as they can't do without volunteers to run their activities. Many volunteers in Europe could be more involved in associations if their voluntary work were more recognized and could be used outside the association (for instance in their Education Curriculum). The main benefit of assessing volunteering in a professional perspective would be to give associations a chance to find more volunteers (especially among youngsters) and for volunteers to build a bridge between voluntary work and education.

Assessing volunteering should be a key issue to enhance innovation in many fields of social and human activities. Innovation is quite obvious. Volunteering is a way to enrich the associations' human resources. Cooperation is also clear as any method or tool proposed in this field would require a close co-operation between volunteers, associations, public authorities (on national and local levels) and private sector (vocational training bodies but also people in charge of human resources on the labour market). The main purpose is to assess voluntary experiences acquired in associations in a professional perspective, that is to say on the labour market, in the non-profit sector but also in the public and private sectors.

Volunteers are not second-class citizens. Volunteering is a chance for associations. Assessing voluntary experiences in a professional perspective could be a way to bridge the gap between voluntary work and employment, taking into account management and ethics.

The questions raised by such a process, assessing voluntary experiences, are numerous: how far can we go in the official recognition, accepted both by public authorities and private sector? Who will be responsible and legitimate for such an assessment? Who will finance the training for the assessors? Could it be a danger for associations as volunteers could be more motivated by personal interests and no more by altruistic reasons? Who will be the beneficiaries: associations, volunteers, society?

This is also part of the VPL project to raise this kind of questions to go further into the implementation of the process, and its impact for lifelong learning. The first VPL project had already insisted on the different learning cultures, approaches, quality processes. Thanks to the numerous examples of good practices in the voluntary sector proposed in the VPL2 project, we can have a better idea of the situation. Apart from the United Kingdom, thanks to the 2002 law of social modernisation, France seems to have been a pioneer in valuing prior learning, especially in volunteering.

4. Managing European diversity, limits and perspectives of VPL

VPL strategies are strongly based on national learning system. One last big issue of VPL is to focus on the national and educational backgrounds of European countries. The European Union has been

composed of 27 countries since the 1st of January 2007. There are not 27 different learning cultures but there is a lot of diversity from one country to another, especially in the field of valuing prior learning. The learning points would consist of seven criteria : approach (tradition), law and regulations (texts), validity and independent assessment (control), form of recognition at national level (practice), transparency and civil effect (impact), accessibility (public), responsibility and accountability (procedure) (5).

Jens Bjornavold (16) has proposed a cluster model used to describe these various learning cultures. The first VPL project had identified six main learning cultures: the dual system (Austria, Germany and Switzerland) based on work experience, the Mediterranean approach (Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal) with a strong Academic education and a weaker tradition of vocational education, the Northern European model (Norway, Denmark, Finland and Sweden) with a strong and common tradition in education and training, the Anglo-Saxon approach (Great Britain and Ireland) with the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) , the "most and explicit example of a system for vocational education" based on competences, achievements and outputs, the mix model (Netherlands, Belgium and France) where certification and formal diplomas are highly regarded and the Eastern-Europe approach (Bulgaria).

In this second VPL project (VPL 2), eleven countries are concerned with seven different learning cultures : Anglo-Saxon (United Kingdom and Ireland), East-European (Czech Republic, Lithuania), German-dual (Germany), Mixed (the Netherlands), Romanic-French (France, Switzerland), Scandinavian (Norway) and South-European (Cyprus, Italy). The different cases proposed and described by the different partners have focussed that despite these cultural differences, and institutional contexts, valuing prior learning raised the same kinds of questions whatever the country.

In the AVE project (17), seven countries were concerned with five main models concerning volunteering : the Anglo-Saxon model (United Kingdom) with a strong and ancient tradition in valuing a voluntary work, the Medium-model (France and Austria) with some initiatives taken in the field of assessing voluntary experiences (regional portfolios, a law for France since 2000 in the Youth and sports field allowing a certification on the basis of a voluntary experience), the Basic model (Germany and Italy) with no official recognition yet for a voluntary experience but some interest in this field (a regional competence of the local authorities), the Eastern-Europe model (Poland and Hungary) with a recent revival in the context of volunteering which has become an issue on the political agenda.

The main barriers faced to assess a voluntary experience come first from the volunteers themselves who are reluctant to speak the language of skills and competences, too professional for them, in the beginning. They need time to accept the idea. For certain associations, this opportunity to bridge the gap between employment and volunteering is also seen as a betrayal; they don't feel competent in human resources. They also need time to see the positive impact of such a process for their voluntary human resources. The third main actors are the professionals of the labour market: a voluntary experience is not yet considered as a professional one but things should change thanks to the opportunities offered by the national legislation or the examples of good practices in other countries. The last and main actors to be convinced of the issue of the VPL or AVE process are the employers: to propose their employee an employment with responsibilities linked to all the skills and competences they have wherever they have been acquired (school, work, voluntary experience, family...).

What could be the main barriers for valuing prior learning? The lack of information could be a first obstacle. How many European citizens are aware of this opportunity? In France, we have seen a huge increase in the demand for "VAE" since 2002, which is a very good point. More and more counsellors in the local agencies for employment are trained to answer the needs and propose a training and/or accompaniment for people interested. Another positive point is the more and more numerous projects proposed in the context of the Leonardo da Vinci programme, including projects for assessing non formal and informal learning. Moreover, with the last generation of projects (2007-2013), transfers of innovation are promoted : the examples of best practice in Europe, in the VPL field, should be very welcome.

The lack of time and motivation could be a second main obstacle. The use of identifying one's own skills and competences is professional oriented. Candidates involved in a VPL process are waiting for concrete results in their professional career: in terms of more responsibilities, or in terms of money (both usually go together). The risk is that VPL would open doors and create hopes which are not

fulfilled in the short term. But in times of more flexible work, when any individual should have three or more different works in his/her working life, Valuing prior learning is a very good process to anticipate the future needs of labour market. It shouldn't be considered in a short term perspective.

A last barrier for Valuing Prior Learning should come from the employers' side. Are they ready to accept that their employees follow this process? In France, the famous "Bilan de compétences" (Competence sheets) have suffered from a very bad image because most of the time they were proposed to employees while they were leaving the firm. A positive attitude of firms towards Valuing prior learning could be taken with suspicion: they would accept that their employees valued new skills and competences on the condition that they would leave the firm. On the other hand, valuing its human resources is a very good point in times of strong competition, especially in Europe. Competence makes the difference.

5. Conclusion

Assessing a voluntary experience or Valuing prior learning in a more general context, have become key issues in the past ten years in Europe. Thanks to the Leonardo da Vinci programme (launched in 1998), many European projects have been initiated in this field (19) and should be integrated in the day to day life of European citizens, linking policy to practice, and so making the goals set in Copenhagen, in 2000, become true.

This is the main purpose of any European project to play a role of pioneer but also to answer the social needs of the Europeans whatever the national diversity, the different learning cultures, the specific approach in valuing prior learning.

The VPL2 project is very original in proposing a multi-cultural approach (11 countries), a trans-sectoral one (non profit, for profit, voluntary sectors), a detailed analysis grid to better understand and manage diversity.

Valuing prior learning should play a major role in building the society of competence, the challenging European economy and society of the 21st Century, the "*most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy*" wanted by the Copenhagen process.

Lifelong learning has been integrated in the policy of all the European countries. It is not a challenge for tomorrow, it is today's reality for many European citizens.

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