

## Survey Methodology

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### Survey Requirements

The **Valmopris project** – an Erasmus+ funded European project – seeks to facilitate the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning. Ultimately, the project's findings and outputs will support the design, delivery and evaluation of non-formal and informal educational activities in prison settings.

The survey was designed to build on initial research carried out prior to the project's inception. It was used to pre-test intuitions (such as the perceived importance of VINFL in prisons amongst different stakeholders) and to garner key information which would help us tailor the validation tool and implementation contexts to the needs of relevant stakeholders.

More specifically, this survey report will provide documented evidence of the perceived need and potential of VINFL in European prisons. It will also provide the basis for identifying the range of competence-oriented informal learning activities that are currently being carried out in prisons and the key competences that prison teachers believe can be most valuably developed through VINFL in a prison-setting.

### Distribution

The survey employed a version of the **stratified random sampling approach**, primarily to target prison teachers (also a range of other stakeholders working within the prison service) in different European countries. The intention was to represent each of the European partner countries and their opinions on the role and perceived potential of VINFL in prisons. This approach would allow us to evaluate findings from sub-groups if regional or professional variations emerged.

The survey was also emailed to and posted on specialist prison education forums and websites such as: EPEA, Prisoners' Education Trust, EPAL. This was designed to increase the sample size and to allow for input from stakeholders in other European countries.

Given the parameters of our sample group, we acknowledged certain potential barriers to completion – primarily within prison settings, where there is often limited or no access to internet and digital technologies. To mitigate this problem as much as possible, the survey was produced in both online and off-line versions and circulated to partners.

The survey was released for 4 months and reminders were reissued to potential participants in order to maximise returns.

### Overview of Survey Design

The survey was tested using a convenience sample in the first instance in order to allow us to minimise errors and confusion before wider distribution. Given the survey was in English, we also wanted to ensure that the language of the survey was accessible and the methodology adopted for each question was appropriate.

Following the convenience sample, the survey was honed to include a blend of 15 qualitative and quantitative questions. Four general approaches were adopted:

- Demographics questions were included to help us analyse the background of research respondents and measure/rationalise geographical differences
- A range of multiple choice questions were designed to allow us to gather vital information about the type and scale of non-formal and informal learning activities being carried out within prisons and the way in which these activities are currently validated. An 'other' option was included in these questions supported by open-ended 'specification' questions to allow space for potentially valuable nuance and variation.

- A ranking approach was adopted in order to allow us to gather information about the importance of competences and skills development. This will be a key element in both the design of the LEVEL 5 validation tool for use within prison contexts and the pilot activities where the LEVEL 5 validation approach will be applied.
- Debriefing questions were included at the end of the survey in order to offer greater autonomy to the respondent as well as an opportunity to include contact details. This links with the dissemination strategy, whereby reach and legacy are vital for the value of the project.

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## Survey Analysis

### Distribution - Demographic Analysis

As highlighted above, countries from across Europe responded to the survey, with the greatest return coming from the UK<sup>1</sup>.

70 respondents (81%) reported their country of origin:

- UK (40) – 43%
- Netherlands (9) – (10%)
- France (8) – (9%)
- Romania (4) – (4%)
- Spain (4) – (4%)
- Germany (1) – (1%)
- Norway (1) – (1%)
- Turkey (1) – (1%)
- Malta (1) – (1%)



As expected, respondents from partner countries constituted the majority of returns, particularly those partners who are delivering the pilot teaching activities. The geographical spread of respondents is useful as it demonstrates widespread interest in the role and potential of non-formal and informal learning within the prison sector.

Of those who responded to the question of employment, almost 75% (66) reported working within the prison education sector – either as teachers or education managers. The remaining respondents work within prisons, either as governors, managers, officers or as affiliated service providers. In total, 83% of 87 respondents reported that they work in direct contact with prisoners.

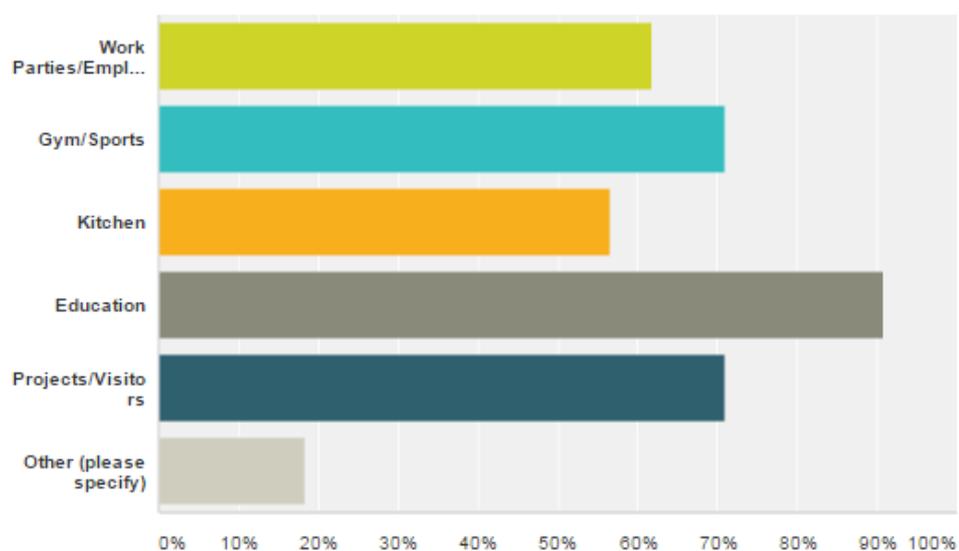
96% of 77 respondents answered affirmatively when asked the question ‘Are you aware of the concepts of non-formal and informal learning?’ Of the same number respondents, 80% consider themselves directly involved in the delivery of non-formal and informal learning. This research demonstrates the prevalence of non-formal and informal learning within the prison sector and underlines the importance of this study.

### Prisoners’ engagement in non-formal and informal learning

On the issue of prisoners’ engagement in non-formal and informal learning, 84% (69) of those who responded believed that prisoners were keen, happy or willing to engage in the non-formal or informal learning opportunities that are provided within prison settings. Interestingly, respondents noted a wide range of areas within the prison where there exists opportunities for non-formal or informal learning and affirmative responses were generally high. Of the options provided, the most commonly cited avenue for engagement in non-formal or informal learning was education where 91% of those who responded (70) acknowledged the potential for such activities.

54 respondents

(71%) cited the gym and visiting projects as avenues for prisoners to access non-formal and



<sup>1</sup> The survey had a total of 87 respondents. It is clear that there is a diverse respondent group with a

informal learning opportunities.

63% (44) of those surveyed believed these opportunities exist within work parties and 56% (39) within the prison kitchens.

### **The importance and centrality of non-formal and informal learning environments within prisons**

These figures would suggest that non-formal and informal learning is deeply embedded within much of the work carried out in prisons. Qualitative responses also add credence to this finding suggesting that VINFL would support the work being carried out across prisons and education departments: with one submission outlining that *“we use non-formal and informal learning in all activities”*. In addition to the options listed, respondents highlighted a range of other areas where opportunities to engage in non-formal and informal learning were embedded.

These generally diverged into three key areas:

The first, could be summated as the everyday life of the prison and the prisoners: where non-formal and informal learning such as halls/residential blocks, recreation areas, multi-faith centres, health centre, family contact and visits were cited as providing opportunities for non-formal and informal learning.

The second opportunities are more commonly associated with additional education provision such as learner forums, peer mentoring, book groups and discussion/debate/conversation groups.

Thirdly, opportunities for non-formal and informal education seem to arise from prisoner progression pathways – such as case management meetings and programme/intervention.

This variety, characterised as *“every contact as an opportunity to learn”* by one respondent, encapsulates the importance of this study and its aim to offer a means of recognising and validating the personal progression made by prisoners in their time within prison.

57 (61%) respondents provided further detail about opportunities and the types of learning where a consistent and formalised approach to VINFL would be beneficial:

*there is in fact no end to non-formal and informal learning activities - being made aware of them as having learning potential is a different matter altogether.*

When citing specific opportunities respondents included social projects; one-off workshops; external education programmes; language classes; listening schemes; health promotions; life skills classes such as healthy eating, cooking or money management; soccer teams coached by prison officers; visiting specialists; creative art workshops, including art, video and theatre production; youth work; projects fostering community integration; or work with external agencies. In relation to project work carried out in partnership with outside agencies, one respondent outlines that

*the prisoners I work with seem to get a huge amount from opportunities to work within non-usual structures with individuals and organisations that come in to offer something different. This is when exciting moments of informal learning occur.*

Despite the apparent importance of these opportunities, when asked if non-formal and informal learning is properly considered and valued, the results would suggest that more awareness-raising is required. Of 64 respondents, 41% believed that the potential of non-formal and informal learning is not properly recognised by those working within the prison sector. Furthermore, 15% of 65 respondents believed that it was not properly recognised or valued by prisoners themselves.

This hypothesis is supported by the fact that 32 (49%) respondents outlined that there existed a lack of understanding from learners and stakeholders and 29 (44%) suggested that a lack of value represented a distinct challenge to the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Whilst this concern is by no means universally true of all respondents, it does represent a need for a carefully considered approach to VINFL. In addition, practical difficulties were also noted, with half of respondents confirming that lack of training and capacity were also likely to present challenges to the validation process.

### **Competences**

The survey provided a wealth of information pertaining to the competences acquired by prisoners as a result of their engagement in non-formal and informal learning opportunities. In direct relation to the aforementioned activities, a range of extra benefits were provided as qualitative responses. These include:

- Problem-solving skills
- Actualisation
- Anger management and aggression regulation
- Empathy, attitudes and an acceptance of difference
- Increased confidence and self-efficacy
- Development of Literacy and language skills and learning strategies
- Work ethics and professional skills
- Improvements in health and wellbeing – diet and weight management, hygiene, smoking cessation
- Improved socialisation – fostering cooperation, interpersonal and team-working skills

These benefits and activities can be mapped directly against the European Framework of Key Competences<sup>2</sup> and can be validated through the use of the LEVEL 5 system which focuses on a blend of social, personal and organisational competences acquired through engagement in non-formal and informal learning activities.

One response highlighted the importance of collaborative engagement, giving rise to a “vital exchange of knowledge, skills and understanding between prisoners”. Another explained that: *working in teams to solve problems is something that takes place during almost every activity, for example students making face masks must work alternatively to lay the plaster onto one another’s face. This practice is a tangible demonstration of trust, co-operation and endurance whilst developing ideas and technical skills. This task is a good example of learning emotionally, spiritually and academically.*

Given that the LEVEL 5 validation system is designed to assess cognitive, activity-related and affective outcomes, our project would be able to create the infrastructure to allow those working within prison to undertake process-oriented assessment and evidencing of these competence developments. The LEVEL 5 validation approach offers the benefit of demonstrating learning outcomes and competence developments in a visual way for both learners and stakeholders alike.

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<sup>2</sup> The Key Competences for Lifelong Learning – A European Framework is an annex of a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006  
<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=URISERV:c11090&from=EN>

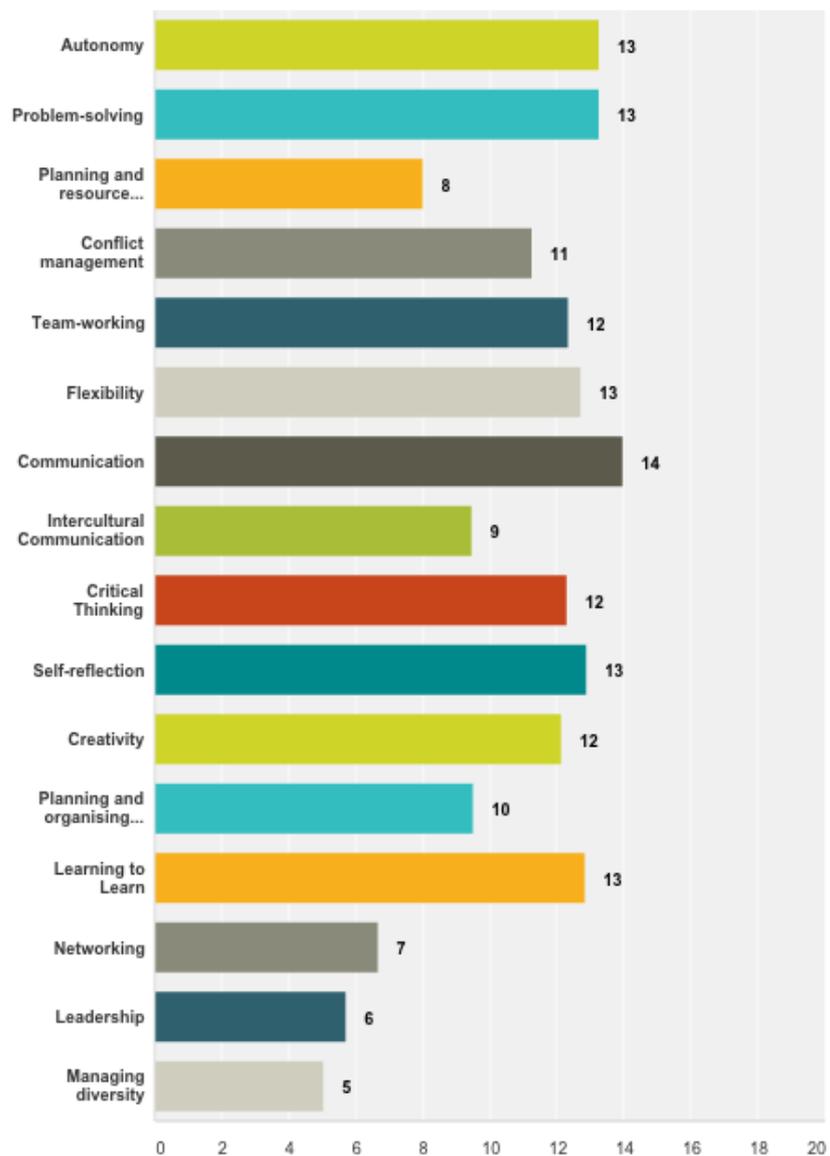
Respondents were asked to rank the five most important **competences** in relation to their day-to-day work with prisoners.<sup>3</sup> Ten competences achieved a score of ten or more. This score was assigned as a result of number of votes and the weighting of a 1-5 ranking. Communication skills were ranked as the most important at 14 (with 51 votes), problem solving (39), self-reflection (38), learning to learn (38), autonomy (34), and flexibility (24) were all given an equal weighting of 13. Creativity (34), critical thinking and team-working (33) were scored at 12, conflict management (25) at 11 and planning and organising one's own learning competence (14) at 10.

Given competences are scored so consistently, a narrowing of competences will prove difficult. However, five key competences are consistently ranked in the top three when we consider the number of votes and the regularity of a high ranking.

**Communication skills** are the most highly regarded competence with 40 respondents (61%) ranking it in the top three. **Problem-solving skills** were selected in the top three 23 times (35%), followed by **self-reflection** at 21 (32%), and finally, **autonomy** and **learning to learn** (31%) each had 20 top three selections.

According to top five ranking, **creativity** and **team-work** also represent important areas of competence development for prisoners, each with 28 selections respectively (43% of total respondents). The survey also set out to ascertain what the **key benefits** of non-formal and informal learning might be for prisoners. Participants were asked to rank the proposed benefits and, like the competences, all benefits received a ranking, which were very closely aligned<sup>4</sup>.

However, when considering total votes, three core benefits were weighted much more highly: **improved self-esteem** (51 / 77%), **improved communication skills** (46 / 70%) and **increased motivation** (44 / 67%). Increased engagement, a broadening of horizons and improved self-direction were also highly ranked. Considering the close alignment of these areas with motivation – this should certainly be considered one of the key drivers for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.



<sup>3</sup> An abridged list of 16 was adapted and provided from the LEVEL 5 methodology. All received a scoring, suggesting that the competences highlighted from our initial research are, in fact, pertinent to the prison sector and prisoners.

<sup>4</sup> Scores ranged from 7.10 to 11.41, a variance of only 4.31.

## Recommendations for the validation of non-formal and informal learning

The survey sought information regarding the current validation practices adopted within prison environments for non-formal and informal educational arrangements – multiple selections were possible. Just over two thirds of those taking the survey responded to this question. 16% (10 respondents) highlighted that no validation methodology was in place. By contrast, only 13% (8) used a process of certification.

The most common method of evaluation was observation, with 56% (35) of respondents confirming that they use this methodology, many of whom explained that it was used in conjunction with other methodologies, particularly self-assessment. Peer assessment returned no results whatsoever. Some respondents also provided qualitative reasoning. This research offers an interesting insight into the affirmative benefits that our validation system could provide:

*Validation should be encouraged because prisoners have found it [informal learning] to be inspiring and engaging and it is a great way of getting prisoners to have a taste of what learning means and that learning does not always have to have a "negative" connotation  
It's important to certify what has been done (number of hours, issues covered, skills acquired...)*

However, it also raises some points of concern which our project will need to address:

*It would be much more desirable to convince governments and prison services of the value of this kind of 'extracurricular' learning, so that space and time is allocated in prisons to carry on with these key learning areas, without having to officially assess them and turn them into statistics.  
...deep, radical learning experiences can have a wide range of outcomes that may not always be able to be articulated at the time of evaluation.*

Whilst the LEVEL 5 system does provide a visual demonstration of learning and competence development through the certification system, it is primarily designed to demonstrate to the prisoner the personal 'distance-travelled' as a result of engagement in a non-formal or informal learning activity. It does not offer statistical evidence and results are not graded. Furthermore, it is hoped that the motivation engendered through the process of engagement and validation will be the type of long-term and subtle outcome that our second respondent refers to.

According to our research, formalised validation processes for non-formal and informal learning barely exist within prisons, at present. As reasoning, a significant number of respondents cited a lack of training for staff, capacity issues and a lack of understanding and value amongst learners and stakeholders as potential obstacles validating informal learning. This problem is well-encapsulated by one respondent who outlined that:

*Non-formal education generates, by definition, a space question...Through cultural activities, often unknown by detainees, educators help them regain motivation and emotions. These projects are also an opportunity to rediscover people from civil society and thus re-establish a link with the outside world. People who engage in non-formal education rarely have the opportunity to exchange their experiences, achievements and doubts. Often they are faced with incomprehension or devaluation of their work within prison - considering that what they do is pure entertainment, without being planned or projected, not valuing it as a real education and/or faced with the lack of space and time for activities, recycling or permanent training or multi-disciplinary coordination with other professionals in the centres. Managers of prison should care greatly about this learning system and training his/her professionals.*

This research provides a clear rationale for the piloting and development of the existing and well-established LEVEL 5 validation system within the prison sector on a European-wide level.

This project has the potential to increase understanding among stakeholders of the validation process and demonstrate clearly the value of this learning and competence development through a process of

planning, self-reflection, evidence and certification. As such, the project sees the dissemination of good practice through a competence framework, practice guidebook and train-the-trainer utility which responds to the needs of the prison sector as vital. This would allow teachers and prison staff to measure progress and milestones in a more structured and consistent way and utilise non-formal and informal learning opportunities more effectively within the rehabilitative process.