How Can Universities Include Validation of Prior Learning? A Proposal Beyond UNESCO

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Abstract

Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) is not new for most countries. Many of them have introduced this type of prior-competence certification, including informal and non-formal learning. Some institutions have linked certification to complementary training processes to assure not only employability but also the possibility to start or continue educational processes that can allow anyone to improve life conditions. VPL has especially been applied to populations excluded from formal education, as these beneficiaries have not had access to regular academic certifications. This phenomenon is also present in postgraduate studies because many people do not have the opportunity to continue their academic development after getting the license certificate, but they do have experiences in informal and non-formal learning.

This proposal sets three steps to develop VPL processes into university postgraduate programs: 1) Institutional preparation and organization, 2) Defining managing steps, and 3) Implementation of the four stages defined by UNESCO. All of these set out from conceptualizing VPL processes as a change of learning conception, recognizing that formal learning is not the only valid way to develop competencies, and positioning universities in a more active role in lifelong learning. Some examples of how universities can implement these steps are presented.

Keywords: Validation of Prior Learning; Lifelong Learning, University

Introduction

Implementing Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) processes in universities requires attention to several dimensions and the implementation of different normative, economic, and technical resources; therefore, there must be decision and policy support from both authorities and those directly involved.

The present proposal does not provide for direct influence on regulatory aspects, since these are beyond the scope of an investigation such as this one, although the paper is intended to propose procedures that can provide light for regulating these processes, thereby ensuring their thoroughness and transparency. Here, the focus of attention is on the operational procedures of preparation and management of a VPL process developed for postgraduate programs. Insofar as

generic steps are suggested that will enable institutions to prepare for the implementation of these processes, this technique can also be applied at other levels with some modifications, such as Higher Technician or undergraduate courses.

The result of the research, consultation, and validation of both program coordinators and university teachers, as well as the international experts consulted and the suggestions they have included in their assessment are provided.

Theoretical Review

Competency-based approaches are becoming fundamental and more widely accepted in higher education. Such approaches address the necessity to appropriately adapt vocational training processes to the demands of the context and to be more in line with the development of knowledge in the 21st century (Tobón, 2008; Casanova et al., 2018). This point of view was also articulated by UNESCO at the Third World Conference on Higher Education held in Paris (2022), where the need to build solid competencies was emphasized to address today's and tomorrow's world, both in terms of inclusion in higher education and academic mobility.

The recognition, validation, and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning refer to all the mechanisms and processes through which countries, governments, and institutions establish the necessary conditions for comparing learning achievements (knowledge, skills, and competencies) with explicitly stated quality assurance standards to make them visible and valuable.

VPL processes have been developed for several decades by different countries. The European Union has been very influential, having taken initiatives to promote VPL throughout the last few decades. It provided a system with guidelines that allowed approximately 150 countries — out of the 193 countries assigned to the United Nations — to develop qualification frameworks modeled after the European Qualification Framework (hereinafter, EQF) and instruments that make VPL processes viable.

In its implementation, VPL considers the entire process: identification, documentation, assessment/evaluation, and accreditation of learning achievements (Yang, 2015). These four fundamental steps provide a structure that allows universities, companies, decision-makers, research institutes, and all those involved to develop a strategy to foster a culture of lifelong learning. The VPL process should align its efforts with academic learning identified in the last three levels of most qualification frameworks: level 6 (bachelor's degree), level 7 (master's degree), and level 8 (doctoral degree). By formulating concrete actions in the VPL process, real linkages can be made with these degree levels and help individuals work progressively to these degrees (CEDEFOP, 2015a).

The VPL process is specifically focused on the person who decides to start and/or continue in the first instance. Therefore, the knowledge and skills of the person, as well as the confidentiality of the information submitted, must be carefully considered. Beginning with principles that guide these processes is important:

- The VPL is a voluntary choice to which anyone should have access.

- The purposes of VPL need to be clarified and communicated accurately and in advance.
- The stages of validation must be clearly defined and communicated to applicants.

Identification

The person applying for VPL must initiate the process by identifying the knowledge, skills, and competencies achieved throughout their life experiences. This progressive self-recognition is fundamental, differs from person to person, and may refer to learning developed within several contexts. Gaining such awareness is considered an achievement of the process, as long as the person takes ownership of his or her learning. In this phase, the applicant must have access to precise and clear information regarding the advantages and costs of the process compared with those of traditional training.

Mentor guidance and the standardization of tools and procedures that support and integrate the factors involved in this phase are essential (CEDEFOP, 2015a). All the information required must be available and easily accessible to applicants, but also to organizations linked to the process (CEDEFOP, 2015a).

Documentation

The post-identification phase, documentation, involves the provision of evidence of the outcomes of the learning acquired. In most cases, this is done through the construction of a portfolio that includes a curriculum vitae (CV) and a career history, along with any documents and/or samples of work that attest to the individual's learning achievements. The process should be flexible in considering various types of evidence, in effect, anything that establishes information on learning achievements (CEDEFOP, 2015a).

In Europe, this whole process is facilitated to the extent that comparability exists, while promoting a common way of expressing knowledge, skills, and competencies in the different economic sectors and education and training qualifications (CEDEFOP, 2015a).

Evaluation

Evaluation is usually referred to as the stage at which a person's learning achievements are compared to certain pre-defined standards. This process is critical to guarantee the credibility of the process, so the tools and processes must be presented in a manner that is as transparent as possible, thus preventing the certification obtained from being considered to be at a lower level than that achieved through formal education processes (CEDEFOP, 2015a). The participation of all sectors and institutions linked to the process is crucial to ensure the creation of relevant standards that must be communicated in a timely manner to the applicants (CEDEFOP, 2015a).

Consideration should be given to whether the tools used for assessment are adapted to the needs and characteristics of the individual, whether they meet criteria of reliability and/or validity, which standards are being used, how relevant the standards are to consider the individual variability that characterizes non-formal and informal learning, and whether the conditions for evaluation have been

clearly defined and communicated to applicants.

Finally, structuring qualifications into modules or learning units is important. This will allow the facilitation of partial recognition for those individuals whose qualifications are not complete and who need to continue with their training itinerary (CEDEFOP, 2015b).

Certification

Certification involves a summative assessment that officially confirms the achievement of results against the standards expected at a sufficient level. This process must be carried out under the aegis of a trusted authority or organization. The value and acceptance of a certification acquired through validation processes for prior learning will depend on the legitimacy of the authority or body that grants such certification. The use of summative assessment approaches should be integrated into the national qualifications systems. (CEDEFOP, 2015a).

Although VPL processes have existed for several decades in many contexts, they are a relatively new topic in countries such as Bolivia. Despite the existence of the Plurinational System of Certification of Competencies (SPCC, by its acronyms in Spanish), which certifies non-formal or informal learning, the certification of competencies has not yet made the link between certification and training (Ministry of Education, 2018).

In the city of La Paz, the main city in Bolivia, there are three universities belonging to the Bolivian University System (SUB): Universidad Mayor de San Andrés (UMSA), Military School of Engineering (EMI), and Universidad Boliviana San Pablo (UCB). None of these universities have developed concrete processes in VPL, although there have been some attempts such as the recognition of empirical librarians to continue their training at the undergraduate level, the accreditation of farmers in the area of agronomy to continue in the higher technical institute, accreditation of people dedicated to health care and their recognition for the degree of nurses in the UMSA, and the possibility of accepting people with experience in early childhood education to continue the major of psychopedagogy at UCB.

To build a broader acceptance and implementation of VPL in the Bolivian University System, this research had the following general objective: "Design and validate the procedures for the validation of prior learning to be implemented in universities of the Bolivian University System." More specific objectives were: a) configure a proposal to introduce VPL processes in the institutions of the Bolivian University system (SUB); b) validate the proposal made for future implementations through national and international experts; and c) systematize some experiences that have used this proposal.

Methodological Aspects

This research has been organized into three stages described in the following table:

Table 1 Design and Organization of the Field Study

STAGE	INSTRUMENTS / TECHNIQUES	ACTORS / SOURCES
A: Design a proposal for the recognition and accreditation of prior learning	.	Researcher
B: Validate the proposal	Validation Workshop	National experts (3)
	Validation Questionnaire	International experts (3)
C: Systematize experiences that use this proposal	Personal VPL Matrices	Beneficiaries

The validation workshop provided a space for involved constituents such as authorities, university professors, and practicing professionals to validate the proposal developed from the Bolivian University System vision. The aim was to have specific contributions from each participant through the intellectual and participative task of evaluating this proposal and verifying its applicability in the Bolivian University System.

The questionnaire was validated by an international expert group as a tool to validate the proposal. The findings were used to adopt or justify the decisions and characteristics of the proposal. Matrices were used to individualize the process for each participant and record the resulting evaluation according to the curricular structure of each program under review. The aim was to have specific contributions from each expert who assessed the proposal and verified its applicability. The experts were asked to comment on the proposal.

A Note on Expertise

National and international experts are constituted in cases considered extreme (Quintana, 2006) which are rich in information and experience regarding VPL, both in Bolivia and abroad. In the present study, experts are those people who have participated in and/or generated processes of VPL. In the case of Bolivia, we work with those officials or former officials of the Plurinational System of Certification of Competencies, individuals who have worked with transitability processes among SEP subsystems and with experts in the subject of lifelong learning, and with university actors in some disciplinary areas with the potential of including VPL processes. In the case of international experts, they linked to projects validating previous learning, as well as researchers on the subject in universities where this process is implemented. All of them participated as validators of the proposal generated through a validation workshop for the national experts and a validation questionnaire for the international experts.

Finally, the beneficiary participants are those who reported having developed informal and non-formal learning through their daily practice in the areas of neuroeducation and university pedagogy. These people were the ones with whom the VPL processes were implemented, allowing the proposal to be validated.

The procedure at each stage is shown in Table 2:

Table 2: Procedure in Phases, Stages, and Tasks

STAGES	TASKS	
Stage A: Design a proposal for the recognition and accreditation of prior learning.	Identify the procedures for the elaboration of competency maps by discipline.	
	Elaboration of procedures for defining products, evidence, indicators, and levels expected for each competency	
	Establishment of curriculum characteristics of training for guides and evaluators of the competency validation process	
	Definition of procedures, costs, people in charge, and others required to start the VPL	
	Definition of the stages and instruments required for the implementation of the VPL	
Stage B: Validation of the proposal	Validation Workshop: National experts	Planning the workshop methodology
		Implementation of the workshop
		Elaboration of results and conclusions
	Validation: International experts	Preparation of the validation questionnaire
		Submission to international experts
		Integration of the information received
		Elaboration of analyses and results
Stage C: Systematize experiences that use this proposal	Application of the proposal in two postgraduate programs	Each program was worked on to define both the curricular structure and the institutional preparation (technical and instrumental) to carry out VPL processes. The programs were: • Diploma in Neuroeducation • Diploma in Teacher Training for Higher Education
	Implementation of the proposal with the applicants	The four steps defined by UNESCO for the implementation of VPL processes were implemented: • Identification • Documentation • Evaluation • Certification

Results

The results of this research are organized around the stages listed in Table 2, which builds upon the guidelines of UNESCO (2012), and defines steps identified for two different pilot programs. This pilot provides validation of the process that can then be applied to other programs.

Stage A
Moment 1

To initiate the VPL process in a university program, identifying characteristics and curricular conditions in order to confirm VPL is possible. This involves responding thoughtfully to questions that are provided and guiding educational managers and faculty of a given program to identify characteristics and curricular conditions for VPL.

The objective of the first moment is to define the curricular requirements necessary for a specific major to participate in VPL processes. It also requires that the following be answered:

- Is the program designed from a competency-based training approach?
- Are there empirical professionals who might be interested in VPL processes?
- Are there sectors (stakeholders) of civil society that would be interested in VPL processes?
- Which units of competence in each selected area could feasibly incorporate VPL processes? Can potential evidence of learning achievement be identified for each competency unit?

Moment 2
Moment 2 starts when a program is identified as having the potential for VPL processes and a decision is made to participate. Decisions must also be made to review, organize, and implement all the steps to prepare the necessary technical aspects: procedures, budgets, operational, human, and instrumental resources.

The objective of this phase is to define the operating procedures and tools required to conduct VPL processes with transparency and quality.

- Definition of procedures
- Preparation of the Training Program for Advisors and Evaluators
- Elaboration of Guides: Advisors, Evaluators, and Applicants

Training of the team of faculty members specialized in VPL
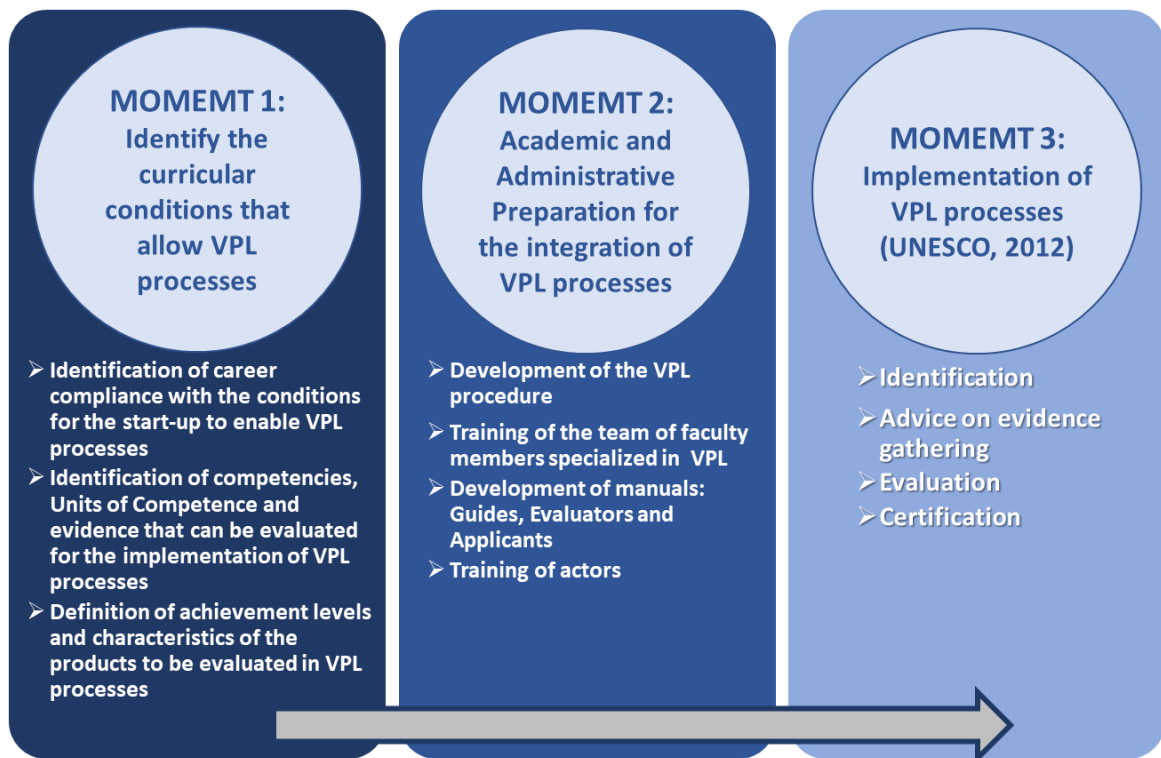
Moment 3
Finally, the third moment consists of the implementation of the VPL process constituted by the four stages identified by international organizations.

The objective of this phase is to develop VPL processes for the purpose of recognition, validation, and accreditation of prior learning.

The following processes are considered:

- Disseminate the call to potentially interested parties
- Accompany the portfolio construction process according to the requirements established for each major and competency unit
- Assess and qualify previous learning by using all the assessment tools and techniques provided for each competency unit
- Certify and record evaluation results for each applicant for each competency unit assessed

Figure 1: Schematic Diagram of the Moments and Phases of the Proposal of the Plan for the Implementation of VPL processes

MOMEMT 1:
Identify the curricular conditions that allow VPL processes

➢ Identification of career compliance with the conditions for the start-up to enable VPL processes
➢ Identification of competencies, Units of Competence and evidence that can be evaluated for the implementation of VPL processes
➢ Definition of achievement levels and characteristics of the products to be evaluated in VPL processes

MOMEMT 2:
Academic and Administrative Preparation for the integration of VPL processes

➢ Development of the VPL procedure
➢ Training of the team of faculty members specialized in VPL
➢ Development of manuals: Guides, Evaluators and Applicants
➢ Training of actors

MOMEMT 3:
Implementation of VPL processes (UNESCO, 2012)

➢ Identification
➢ Advice on evidence gathering
➢ Evaluation
➢ Certification

Stage B

This stage consists of two moments, the results of which are explained below:

Validation Workshop: National experts

The validation workshop was conducted with six majors: Business Administration, Social Communication, Law, Graphic Design and Visual Communication, Systems Engineering, and Psychopedagogy. The program director and two full-time and part-time professors from each program participated. All suggestions generated during the workshop were incorporated and added to the structure of the proposal for VPL processes in universities.

Validation Questionnaire: International experts

Three international experts on the subject of Validation of Prior Learning and Certification for Continuing Education Processes participated in the validation questionnaire. They were provided with the tables and the proposal shared with the national population, but without the possibility of commenting and discussing their opinions in a workshop, so each expert responded in a completely independent manner.

Table 3: Feedback from the experts

	Expert 1	Expert 2	Expert 3
Moment 1	- Identify the existence of possible interested parties - Add a section where, in addition to the evidence/products, the type of test or suggested strategy is placed to measure the level of competency, in order to consider all possible cases.	- Assure that the qualifications and criteria to be used as the standard for VPL procedures are composed of verifiable units	- Delete point 2, as it would be expected that by regulation and by compliance with curricular requirements - Clarify in point 3 that "units of competence" refers to subjects in a curriculum. - Include in the glossary document the concept of "Portfolio" in its relation to VPL processes - Provide a finished sample and a blank form - Include numerical scoring based on national and institutional regulations. - Provide precise references on the construction of the rubric and the conversion of the corresponding score - Include clear instructions on how to fill out the second part of Table 1.3.
Moment 2	- Include a stakeholder who has the role of overseer and is responsible for supervising the process and attesting to the objectivity of the process. - Organize the validation procedure, disaggregating it into other, more tangible activities	-	- The manuals for evaluators must have clarity regarding the learning path that each major has and how it is applied to each applicant.
Moment 3	- Include notification to participants and an explanation of the steps based on results	- Providing information to the applicant is the most important part of the organization of VPL - Strengthen the applicant's ownership of their own learning experiences by reflecting on them	- Explain what a portfolio is about - Include a process of induction into the process and portfolio. Modulate expectations about the evaluation - Feedback to portfolios should be considered within the characteristics and use of the Applicant Handbook - Clarify all aspects related to qualifications in order to meet national and institutional parameters

With all the observations made both in the validation workshop with program directors and professors and with the feedback and suggestions made by international experts, the proposal was redrafted.

Stage C

The example below presents one of the modules resulting from applying the proposal to incorporate VPL processes in one university program: Diploma in Neuroeducation, which is the first part of the Master in Neuroscience and Education. The purpose was to develop a way that people, who have acquired learning through informal or non-formal sources, can access the Master's program without starting with a Diploma. The processes followed were in accordance with each moment proposed:

Table 4: Systematization of pilot experiences

MOMENT 1:

Identification of curricular conditions that allow VPL processes

FACTS TO CONSIDER		THE EXPERIENCE
1. Potential program	- Has the program been designed from a competency-based approach? - Are there professionals who might be interested in VPL processes?	Diploma in Neuroeducation. The program has been designed from a competency-based approach and there are professionals interested in VPL processes.
2. Areas of work performed within the program	- Are the areas of training in the program linked to professional practice? - What areas would be the most viable to support VPL processes?	The areas for professionals in education would be: - Teaching-learning process to develop personal and professional skills. - Combinations of different methods that can be used in schools: project-based learning or task-based learning. - Improve the different environments where people develop their potential in all human dimensions: cognitive, affective, political, and social, among others.
3. Competence Units that could have been developed informally or non-formally	- What competency units in each selected area could be feasible to incorporate VPL processes?	The example: | Module	Competence Unit
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Higher brain functions	Identify the neuroanatomical structures, brain systems, and processes that underlie learning, memory systems, comprehension, and production of spoken language, as well as learning a second language and possible language disorders that may occur.	

4. Possible evidence, performance/ product criteria for each UC	- What kind of possible evidence of learning achievement can be identified for each unit of competence?	Video made by the postulant that explains functions and neuroanatomy involved in making decisions, learning, the influence of the social environment, and differences within people in specific situations.	
5. Knowledge involved in the performance/ product	- What is the knowledge (conceptual, procedural, and attitudinal) involved in this competence?	- Are we emotional or rational? - How does the brain learn emotions and behaviors? - The social brain - What makes humans so equal and so different at the same time? - The brain and modern life - How do current society and the environment affect the brain?	

- Define the possible levels that candidates can achieve with the evidence presented.

6. Possible levels of achievement for each knowledge	Level 1 Receptive	- There is a reception and general understanding of the information. - The performance is very basic and operational. - There is low self-esteem. - They have notions about knowing and doing. - There is motivation toward the task	Reproval
	Level 2 decisive	- Simple context problems are solved. - There are technical elements of the processes involved in the competition. - Some basic concepts are possessed. - Performs assigned activities.	
	Level 3 Autonomous	- There is autonomy in performance (advice from other people or constant supervision is not required). - Projects and resources are managed. - There is scientific argumentation. - Problems of various kinds are solved with the necessary elements. - Candidate acts with his own criteria	Approval
	Level 4 Strategic	- Strategies for change are proposed. - There is creativity and innovation. - There are quality intuitive performances. - There are high levels of impact. - There is a prospective and systemic analysis of the problems. - The candidate has a high commitment to his own well-being and that of others.	

MOMENT 2:

Administrative Academic Preparation for Incorporation of VPL Processes

FACTS TO CONSIDER		THE EXPERIENCE
1. Prepare procedures, costs, and the academic team responsible for the validation of competencies	- Define the procedures for the VPL process. - Establish the costs of the process and those responsible - Define the calendar and periodicity of the evaluation.	The project of the program was presented including all the curricular data for the VPL and corresponding costs. The master is going to open new registrations each year.
2. Prepare the manuals and protocols for all the actors linked to the VPL processes	- Design the manual and protocols for assessors. - Design the manual for candidates	Manuals have been prepared so that interested parties can have access to all the information, both procedural and administrative.
3. Train guides and evaluators of the process in specific skills validation	- Design the training course: skills, workload, modality, didactics, and evaluation. - Define logistics and participants. - Develop the course	Through a course carried out with the Center for Lifelong Learning Services, personnel from the Department of Education of the Bolivian Catholic University have been trained

MOMENT 3:

VPL processes implementation

FACTS TO CONSIDER		THE EXPERIENCE
1. Define the target candidates and the most pertinent procedures to call them.	All those interested in formally continuing their training in neuroeducation and whose experience is based on their job performance and/or their training from non-formal learning (continuing training without an academic degree).	7 candidates induced
2. Advise and accompany registered candidates in the process of gathering evidence of learning achievements.	Those interested have been assigned to a member of the staff of the Department of Education trained in VPL processes, who has advised and accompanied each one in the construction of their digital portfolios, organizing them by folders based on the Guide built for the orientation of everything. the process.	6 candidates prepared portfolios
3. Assess prior learning of registered candidates.	The assessment process was developed. Initially based on the portfolios presented and later through interviews via Zoom with each of the candidates.	Reviews and interviews developed
4. Certify the previous learning of the	The grades of the candidates were registered in the academic system of the	6 certified persons

accredited candidates according to the program.	university. They can continue with the second part of the master's degree in Neurosciences and Education.

Conclusions

Using the two-moment process tool provides a method for institutions to organize how VPL can be used within different academic areas. The results of this study showed that this tool can be generalized to other spaces, levels, and institutions. In the cases used within this study, the departments already had a willingness to implement VPL, and this would need to be the case for any institution prior to using this tool. The two-moment process is not a way to standardize the VPL process, but rather to help academic areas to be clear about what they are trying to accomplish and determine the best ways for implementing VPL for their curriculum.

Priority areas that have been identified for VPL in higher education in Bolivia include those with empirical experiences: health, technical, human, and social; however, traditional women's work should also be considered to provide greater access to higher education for women in Bolivia. For example, VPL could be conducted in areas such as early childhood education; education of individuals with disabilities; health care, including care of the elderly, children, and pregnancies; and commercial initiatives such as textile production. These areas have considerable knowledge development that could be assessed and included in academic programs. The impact of evaluating women's work through the VPL process and access to and completion of higher education needs to be researched. Even though the occupations certified by the SPCC [*Sistema Plurinacional de Certificación de Competencias*] have a large female presence, there is still no parity in these processes, another aspect that needs research.

Research in the educational field not only contributes to the enrichment of the corpus of knowledge of the educational sciences, but must necessarily enable the development of solutions, answers, and projects that allow the main aspects of education to be carried out. From this perspective, education is a fundamental right that states, educational institutions, actors, and society in general must safeguard to provide education for all (EFA). The motto of the Global Monitoring Report on Education (UNESCO, 2020) is *Inclusion and Education: All without exception.* We must be able to achieve quality education for all, including higher education (Sustainable Development Goal 4.3), with consideration of lifelong learning and access to non-traditional populations in universities. That is why we need to have all the possible mechanisms in place to achieve this goal. Higher educational institutions must assume the leading role and responsibility in fulfilling this right.

Expanding processes and researching the significance of those processes, such as VPL in Bolivia and other countries would allow a further understanding of the impact of VPL on learners, including the ways in which VPL impacts the individual, and thus how that impact in turn touches the individual's community and overall social issues, and even more importantly, the ways in which VPL supports learners

with reduced access to specialized vocational training. The results from impact research could provide insight that can be used to inform the development of policies, such as financing policies, for these processes that could facilitate outreach to larger populations, which, in turn, would also have an effect on productive, technological, economic, and social development. VPL could play a role in democratizing all levels of education and improving the quality of life of the citizens of a given country.

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