



# Country report

# Netherlands

2016 update to the European inventory  
on validation of non-formal and informal learning

Author: Ruud Duvekot

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# 1 Introduction and evaluation

## 1.1 Abstract

The Validation of Prior Learning (VPL, or EVC in Dutch) became part of the historical and cultural context of the Netherlands based on a vision and instrumentation of lifelong learning. Nowadays, validation is considered necessary not only to take account of the Dutch Lifelong Learning (LLL) setting, but also to examine closely the national learning culture with its specific systems, institutions and critical success factors.

From the beginning, the Netherlands was oriented towards integrating VPL in the operational processes of national and sectoral systems for learning (education and training) and employment (human resources management and development). From a top-down perspective on this integrated approach, there is a good overview of the responsibilities associated to validation so that VPL can be used to its full potential. From a bottom-up perspective, there are real, practical issues for opening up VPL to the users themselves, both in qualitative as well as in quantitative terms. This means that although VPL in the Netherlands seems to be fairly well organised, there are fundamental questions about the use of VPL and how to make it more accessible to users.

A new policy on validation of non-formal and informal learning was presented in early 2014. The policy aimed to broaden the validation opportunities for Dutch citizens. The outcome of this re-orientation is closely linked to making VPL a successful tool in both learning and employment processes. Another objective is to share ownership of the validation method and its instruments, such as the use of portfolio, assessment and validation tools. This strategy entails both a national and a sectorial orientation, with the former using the formal pathway to VPL and the sector-approach using a more informal pathway. The formal path values people's learning outcomes, measured against a national qualification. The informal path values someone's learning outcomes within the context (work, volunteering, social activities) without relating personal learning experiences to a specific national qualification.

## 1.2 Main changes since the 2014 update

Since 2013, there has been a shift in the Netherlands from using VPL as a specific instrument to recognise prior learning towards a more differentiated way of validating informal and non-formal learning. Therefore, the system and infrastructure of VPL have been intensely evaluated (MOCW, 2013; Voorstel validering, 2013). The evaluation results led to developing a new system in which there are two different paths for validating prior learning (MOCW, 2014; MOCW/MSZW, 2015):

1. **The labour market route:** VPL is geared at career guidance of adults on the labour market. Prior learning outcomes of individuals are validated against sector/ industry standards or formal qualifications. A learning programme – not necessarily a qualification-oriented programme – is designed to support intra- or inter-sector employability of people. VPL-tools are the e-portfolio, portfolio-training, the 'ervaringsprofiel', competence tests, etc. If a formal EVC-procedure is followed, the result can also be an 'ervaringscertificaat'.
2. **The education route:** learning and competences of an individual are validated against a national qualification. The goal for the learner is to validate his or her competences in order to obtain a formal qualification. VPL-tools are intake-assessment, e-portfolio, competence tests, ECVET-methods, etc. An 'ervaringscertificaat' can be part of someone's learning outcomes but is no longer essential for obtaining exemptions or a partial/full qualification. Since this dual pathway is organised, there is no longer an exclusive role for the 'ervaringscertificaat'. The awarding bodies for qualifications (in

general exam committees of VET-schools or universities) can also use the other mentioned VPL-instruments.

To enhance the use and quality of VPL in this dualistic system, the government, following the advice of the advisory commission on 'flexibilising higher education' (Adviescie. FHOW, 2014), appointed two quartermasters to investigate the state of play of validation of prior learning in the higher education sector. The assumption was that citizens could obtain effective access to higher education by using VPL to obtain credits and/or qualifications. However, this entailed that there is certainty about the value of one's learning outcomes with respect to the content and level of the educational outcomes of learning programmes.

In their conclusions and recommendations, the quartermasters presented views on validating the capabilities and limitations in higher education. As such, this list exemplified the state of play of VPL for all learning levels in the Netherlands, in 2015. In particular, it gave an insight into what is needed to achieve the lifelong learning culture as aimed for by the Government. A number of critical success factors were identified for effectively operationalising validation as the engine of the lifelong learning culture:

1. Integrating Validation: there is a change in how education is perceived, from an exclusive educational activity to an inclusive activity in which all learning outcomes previously achieved, in whichever learning environment, can be one of the pillars of the proposed new learning culture. This calls for the integration of the validation of prior learning outcomes into the existing learning programmes (in the VET, HE, training sectors). Such an integrated approach to LLL, including the process of validation, stimulates the provision of adequate learning programmes that are demand- or learner-steered.
2. Validate broadly and formative: validating a person's learning outcomes, prior to a particular learning programme, tends to be executed in a summative assessment. Formative validation is however essential for evaluating development of the learner. Together, both types of validation (summative and formative), create an integrated validation system that is highly intertwined with the (remaining) personalised learning. This integration is still lacking in all forms of learning offered to learners and especially in the higher education sector. However, if offered, it will constitute attractive prospects for learners (Duvekot & Brouwer, 2015).

#### *Moving forward*

In the new dual approach, the objectives of the adult learner are central to VPL, either for employability or for obtaining a formal qualification. The current management role of the Ministry of Education for the quality control of VPL providers in both the labour market route and the educational route will be phased out. With ensuring the quality of validation in the education route as an integrated part of the regular quality assurance in education, a separate quality assurance of VPL providers within the education route will no longer be necessary.

The quality control in the labour market route will be managed by the Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC. In 2015, the social partners prepared a quality label for VPL providers in the labour market route. The National Kenniscentrum EVC (part of the Stichting Examenkamer) will ensure the quality of the APL procedures and promote the civil effect of the 'ervaringscertificaat'.

Important to understand is that a link between the two routes will still be possible when, for instance, someone has obtained an 'ervaringscertificaat' in the labour market route and later also decides to obtain a national qualification. The awarding school or university can then – on the basis of this certificate – grant exemptions or a qualification. Incidentally:

- The labour market route is about career guidance and personal development. The award of an ‘ervaringscertificaat’ is also an option. Quality control of this VPL is secured by the Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC.
- The education route is about obtaining exemptions for qualifications or a partial/full qualification. The quality of VPL is secured by the integration of VPL into the regular quality control in education. For this purpose the ‘ervaringscertificaat’ can be part of someone’s learning outcomes that will be assessed by the school or university, but is not required anymore since other methods for valuing one’s learning outcomes can also be used.

## 2 National perspective

### 2.1 Overarching approach to validation

A national system for validation of non-formal and informal learning in the Netherlands commenced in 1998. Under the umbrella-term ‘EVC’ – which stands for ‘*Erkenning van Verworven Competenties*’ or in English ‘Validation of Prior Learning’ – such validation was [and still is] intended to take stock of existing knowledge and skills: in other words, rather than being half empty, Dutch VPL takes the view that the glass is half full! This motto is based on a number of basic principles underlying this kind of VPL:

- VPL recognises the fact that learning on the job or via other non-formal learning situations (learning through practical experience) can in principle deliver the same (professional) skills and qualifications as learning within formal (classroom-based) situations.
- Recognition means awarding certificates or diplomas on the basis of a generally recognised standard, such as the qualification structure for professional education. Obviously there are also other standards relating to the labour market which employers and employees regard as relevant. External legitimacy is the key requirement for recognition.
- VPL is not a goal in itself. It contributes to the desire to develop individuals and to strengthen human capital management within companies. It is an important means for realising permanent labour market suitability and deployment.
- For people already in employment, skills can be developed, which these individuals do not yet have, but which both they and their employers regard as necessary. In such cases, VPL acts as a reliable yardstick for determining the existing skills and qualifications held by the individual employee. Based on this inventory, a tailor-made training or development path is formulated.
- Rational investment in training by companies and by society as a whole assumes an understanding of existing skills and qualifications, or the stock of skills and qualifications in the company respectively. VPL-procedures make it possible to identify existing skills and qualifications in order to be able to subsequently come to a decision about the investments needed in training.
- VPL-procedures make it possible to visualise the profitability of training by expressing the results of training efforts in terms of a general standard. As when calculating the value of other economic production factors, the identification of the value of skills and qualifications assumes a common and reliable standard in which this value is expressed.
- The provision of flexible or customised training courses assumes that we can gauge a person’s existing skills level. VPL can also improve the match between education and the labour market. This applies especially in the case of skills-related training.

- The VPL assessment is designed to assess professional activities. The assessment results provide valuable feedback on the content and methods of the formal learning paths. The training courses are given direct information about the degree to which they succeed in adequately preparing their students for professional practice. This effect is strengthened by the fact that a distinction is made between training and assessment.

#### *Approaches to VPL*

The VPL-system in the Netherlands developed a threefold approach:

- Recognition of prior learning – an informal procedure that leads to a career or learning advice, in the form of a validated portfolio or '*Ervaringsprofiel*',
- Accreditation of prior learning – a formal procedure in which a candidate can get accreditation of his/her learning outcomes measured against a national qualification standard ('*Ervaringscertificaat*'). Since 2015 (MOCW/SZW, 2015), other VPL-instruments can also be used for this purpose, including intake-assessment, e-portfolio, competence tests, etc. There is no monopoly for the '*ervaringscertificaat*' in accrediting people's learning outcomes.
- Validation of prior learning (VPL) – the umbrella-term that includes all forms of validation: the two formal ones already mentioned, but also the informal use of VPL by anyone or any organisation when trying to link someone's prior learning outcomes to more than a formalised lifelong learning perspective, such as a job-promotion, transition from work-to-work, validation as a volunteer, etc.

Incidentally, when the terms 'EVC' or 'VPL' are used in this report, it can mean a formalised form of VPL or a more informal use of VPL. The latter use strives to achieve a range of lifelong learning outcomes. The '*Ervaringsprofiel*' can be issued by any assessment facilitator for any person wanting to get a career or learning advice.

The '*Ervaringscertificaat*' is a certificate that can only be awarded if it is carried out as an APL-procedure by an accredited 'EVC-supplier'. Since 2016 this accreditation is managed by the Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC in the labour market route. This certificate is used to assess and recognise the competences (both vocational and general) of a candidate in relation to sectoral standards (branch or sector qualification). It can, when someone has obtained an '*ervaringscertificaat*' in the labour market route and later decides to obtain a national qualification, also be used for obtaining exemptions or a partial/full qualification for a VET qualification or a HE qualification (awarded by universities of applied sciences and the Open University).

#### *Development of VPL in the Netherlands*

Different phases in the development of the validation system in the Netherlands can be distinguished:

- Until 2006, the main objective was to encourage the take up of VPL. Government, schools/colleges/universities and social partners (trade unions and employers) focused on creating favourable circumstances for developing and implementing EVC in as many contexts as possible: in work, in voluntary work, in reintegration and job-seeking, in education and training. This approach was the initial responsibility of the Dutch Knowledge Centre on VPL ('*Kenniscentrum EVC*') and focused on the change of the learning culture in general.
- From 2006, a greater focus was put on quality assurance to increase the accessibility and transparency and to guarantee the summative effects by means of certification or qualification. The role of the *Kenniscentrum EVC* changed from overall responsibility for all features of VPL, to supporting quality.

- The change of strategy for validation taking place since 2013 in relation to the government's drive towards 'a participation-society' in which all stakeholders have to take ownership and responsibility for their own role in (lifelong) learning. The focus is on using VPL as a dual instrument for validating people's learning outcomes, linked not only to national qualifications but also to career guidance on the labour market (sector level training or non-formal learning).

The new dual policy on validation was presented in early 2014 and broadened the validation opportunities for Dutch citizens. The outcome of this re-orientation is closely linked to making VPL a successful tool in both learning and employment processes. Another objective is to share ownership of the validation method and its instruments, such as the use of portfolio, assessment and validation tools. This strategy entails both a national and a labour market orientation, with the former validating experiences to get exemptions and the latter for providing people with an '*Ervaringscertificaat*' or '*Ervaringsprofiel*'. However, both pathways can also utilise other VPL-instruments such as e-portfolios, intake-assessments and competence tests.

#### *Specific characteristics of VPL in the Netherlands*

- Validation of competences can take place in line with a national standard (educational or occupational standards). It can however also focus on someone's potential or employability and result in learning or career advice.
- Public as well as private education and training institutions can offer VPL, as long as they are either integrated in the quality assurance of the education system (the education route) or are accredited as a VPL-provider by the Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC (the labour market route).
- VPL is used for career development on the labour market, as well as for shortening paths in education and training.
- Anyone can follow a VPL procedure. The focus in the education route however is on adult workers and jobseekers.

#### *VPL and personalised learning*

In the Netherlands, VPL is more and more linked to personalised learning since VPL is always focused on an individual's learning outcomes and the use of these experiences for further learning or career steps. VPL is a system which, independent of the type of learning programme, focuses on recognising, valuing, validating and developing the competences that an individual has previously learned in any type of learning environment (formal, non-formal or informal). Personalised learning is the dynamic learning concept focused on the individual learner, which can initiate (or help initiate) and establish individual tailored learning programmes in a learning culture based on self-driven, flexible and forward-looking lifelong learning (Duvekot, 2016).

### **Box 1 EVC as a form of personalised learning in teacher training**

In a case concerning lateral entry into the teaching profession, VPL showed its personalised character. The question 'why VPL?' was clearly answered: a publicly-funded system for lateral entry into the teaching profession has been established, where the aptitude test can be rightly described as a VPL approach. All the respondents in the case confirmed that this aptitude test had a strong impact on a personal level, in particular in compiling the portfolio. However, the degree to which they were given space to use this awareness of the value of their prior learning experiences to create their own personal learning programmes within the learning triangle went too far. Neither teacher-trainer nor employer were able to cope (yet) with the personalised learning programme; the teacher-trainer could barely offer any customised learning and employers were generally more interested in how they could meet the requirement to work with 'responsible' teachers as efficiently as possible.

The lateral entrants themselves matched the profile of 'the dream teacher for the learning society' in many ways: the teacher as a creative and dynamic innovator of learning and inspiration of learning at school. Nevertheless, the school organisation and teacher training either do not yet permit this role at all, or only marginally.

Source: Duvekot, 2016

While VPL identifies the potential value of an individual's learning, personalised learning assumes that VPL can support the individual's contribution to the dialogue with other actors on the meaning, form and content of learning. As a result, an important distinction between these two approaches arises from the management of learning and the links that can be made between actors during learning:

- VPL mainly functions as a context-driven process. It is geared towards connecting actors during learning (acquisition) and formulating the contributions of the actors involved in this process (participation). Acquisition in participation is key to VPL.
- Personalised learning can be viewed as a process driven by the individual. It focuses on making a personal contribution to achieve development goals. Participating in the acquisition (during VPL) is key to personalised learning.

VPL and personalised learning concern learning processes which allow individual learners to allocate themselves an active role within the 'learning society' when it comes to achieving personal, civic and/or social competences and impacts. Civic impact means achieving a learning outcome in the context of a particular qualification standard within the education system. Social impact is focused on results which are relevant to job profiles, targets, participation goals, or assignments. Personal impact means achieving empowerment, career and study orientation or personal development.

## 2.2 Validation in education and training

In 2000, a national working group on validation of prior learning formulated a broad vision on EVC and the implementation process. EVC had to bridge the gap between education supply and demand on the labour market side. The challenge was to connect these two worlds via the learner: on the one hand, by converting learning experiences into certificates or diplomas; and, on the other, by allowing for the development of competences in a career context (Werkgroep EVC, 2000).

Legal provisions on the validation of non-formal and informal learning in the Netherlands are embedded in education laws relating to VET and HE:

- In the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector, the Law on Adult & Vocational Education (WEB, 1996) was the first law where the foundations were laid for what was formally developed later in 1998 as EVC-policy in the Netherlands.
- In Higher Education, the law "*Wet of het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek*" (WHW – law on higher education and scientific research) regulates the admission and exemption policy based on validation. Higher education institutions are left free to translate this regulation per study in the "*Onderwijs en examenreglementen*" (OERs – rules on education and exams). It is important to note that the use of EVC is only possible in higher vocational education (HBO) and not in universities, apart from the Open University.

Apart from using EVC as an instrument for awarding exemptions or partial/full qualifications for education programmes, it can also be used for admittance to education. Adults aged over 21 who do not meet the formal entry requirements can undergo a formal procedure called the '21+test', which tests the required level in Dutch, English and the specific subject of the

programme. There are a number of institutions that state that an EVC procedure can be used to replace this test.

As explained in the introduction, validation of non-formal and informal learning in the Netherlands consists of two pathways, one is linked to the education system and the other one to the labour market, depending on the need for a qualification on top of the need for employability:

1. **The labour market route:** VPL is geared at career guidance of adults on the labour market. Prior learning outcomes of individuals are validated against sector/industry standards or formal qualifications. A learning programme – not necessarily a qualification-oriented programme – is designed to support intra- or inter-sector employability of people. VPL-tools are the e-portfolio, portfolio-training, the ‘ervaringsprofiel’, competence tests, etc. If a formal EVC-procedure is followed, the result can also be an ‘ervaringscertificaat’.
2. **The education route:** learning and competences of an individual are validated against a national qualification. The goal for the learner is to validate his or her competences in order to obtain a formal qualification. VPL-tools are intake-assessment, e-portfolio, competence tests, ECVET-methods, etc. An ‘ervaringscertificaat’ can be part of someone’s learning outcomes but is no longer essential for obtaining exemptions or a partial/full qualification. As this dual pathway is organised there is no longer an exclusive role for the ‘ervaringscertificaat’. The awarding bodies for qualifications (in general exam committees of VET-schools or universities) can also use the other mentioned VPL-instruments.

### 2.3 Validation and the labour market

In the Netherlands, validation of prior learning is seen in various contexts:

- To increase the employability of individuals and employees by recognising their prior learning related to a qualification and describe these outcomes in a certificate of experience.
- To get more insight into employees' capacities to create an optimal match with occupational profiles or learning programmes on the job.
- To increase the employability of individuals by recognising and possibly accrediting their prior learning to shorten the duration of continuing training/education programmes, in order to attain nationally recognised qualifications.

Thanks to EVC (especially the ‘ervaringscertificaat’), in almost all public and private sectors, recruitment and selection of personnel is increasingly also covering target groups without the formal requirements. One can state that EVC influenced the existing learning culture in accepting that learning outcomes can be (1) acquired in any learning environment and (2) achieved in formal, non-formal and informal learning. EVC is also used to address formative issues such as retention of personnel or outplacement (from ‘work to work’) and employability. The role of the private sector in EVC is related to activities such as financing and raising awareness within sectors and companies or acting as EVC-providers.

Training Funds often finance agreements on EVC. Both employees and employers pay a small amount of their incomes to these sector funds, which were originally set up to support educational initiatives for employees (Duvekot et al, 2005).

An example of VPL-initiatives in the private sector – based on a multi-stakeholder collaboration – is provided by the Rockwool Group in Roermond, the Netherlands.

## Box 2 EVC at Rockwool

The Rockwool Group is the world's leading supplier of innovative products and systems based on stone wool. Since the 1990s learning is a key element in the human resource management-policy of Rockwool. In the Dutch plant in Roermond this HRM-policy can be regarded as an ongoing process of linking learning and working for each individual employee by means of competence-steered assessment methods and work-based development-programmes:

- Assessment is considered as a summative and a formative method for enhancing performance of not only the employees for the company but also of the company for the employees.
- Learning goals are oriented towards employability and qualification, on the one hand, for strengthening the working-processes and, on the other hand, for creating empowerment and opening up internal/external career-opportunities for the employees.
- Development is focused on facilitating learning trajectories that are beneficial for employability, personal development and internal/external career-steps of the employees.
- EVC is the method for linking the potential of employees with the need for competences. It is utilised as a multi-targeted method for sustainable HRM.

On 15 October 2013, Rockwool was awarded, in Brussels, the Observal-Net European Prize for Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning, in the category of *Work Based Competence Development and Recognition*.

Source: [www.observal-net.eu](http://www.observal-net.eu) (<http://www.observal-net.eu/content/work-based-competence-development-and-recognition>)

Outflow and outplacement of personnel also benefit from validation. For instance, in the military there is a high proportion of employees with fixed-term appointments. To be more successful at placing these employees on the labour market, EVC can offer both development and qualification. Likewise, in mergers and reorganisations, EVC offers development and qualifications to find the right place for personnel, whether internally or, as shown above, private sector stakeholders play an important role in the implementation of validation in the Netherlands. A number of key learning points can be identified from experience to date in this sector:

- Collaboration between companies and educational establishments is essential to ensure that work-based learning can be customised following the EVC procedure. Companies have to facilitate and in particular provide guidance in workplace learning, and educational establishments must accept and value the workplace as a learning environment.
- Employees need to be as self-reliant and programme-independent as possible in the development of their personal development programmes, following an EVC procedure. In this sense, it is up to the individual to make choices concerning the degree of self-determination or external direction within the development programme. These choices range between 100 % self-determination of form and content of the programme (*empowerment*) and 0 % (*pampering*).
- A more customer-centred orientation of education institutions towards organisations/businesses is promoted by the ministry in order to help anchor EVC in Human Resource Development. Conversely, increased formulation of demands is needed from organisations/businesses in order to help anchor EVC in the policy of educational institutions (Beleidsreactie 2012).
- Organisations/companies must ensure that their formulation of demands is effective. Formulation of demands means that there is clarity concerning (1) the competences present within the organisation and (2) the required competencies within the framework of the organisational aims. A match can be made between (1) and (2), so that (3) the competency demands within the organisation and ultimately (4), an action plan for the

validation and development of available competences, as well as those that need to be developed, emerges. Good examples of this integral approach are offered by Rockwool, the sector of municipal personnel and the agricultural sector (AGF).

- Research is needed into the added value of EVC, among other things, focussed on its economic, financial and social effects and also the relation with other assessment systems, e.g.: in-company, social, etc. (Duvekot, 2016).

### 2.3.1 Skills audits

The change of strategy for validation in 2013 is taking place in relation to the government's drive towards more responsibility for stakeholders in (lifelong) learning and thus validation. Social partners focus on their labour market responsibilities. The authorities take care of the individuals and groups that need special attention. The focus of government's role changed towards overseeing the quality of and access to EVC, in the context of a system emphasising the validation of learning outcomes for two EVC-perspectives:

- Validation of non-formal learning (sector certificates). The stakeholders in the labour market will be responsible for organising these validation procedures themselves, including quality assurance.
- Validation with the intention of getting a diploma in formal education. Institutes of formal education are responsible for the procedures and therefore will be under control of the Inspectorate of Education. The learning objectives as supported by EVC can differ and the outcome of EVC can have both a formal and non-formal learning impact (further learning).

These forms of EVC can be considered as different kinds of skills audits: they focus on the validation of prior – formal, non-formal and informal – learning outcomes, in order to find out if there is a possible link between a personal learning biography and a social-economic purpose in society. In the Netherlands it is more appropriate to speak of a competences-audit since competences embrace skills, knowledge and attitude as denominators.

## 2.4 Validation and the third sector

The Netherlands Centre for Social Development, MOVISIE (in their capacity as research institute for the voluntary sector), developed an EVC-procedure for volunteers. The EVC procedure consists of a portfolio for the volunteer and two manuals (one for the supervisor and one for the assessor). In addition MOVISIE developed a specific procedure for social relief workers<sup>1</sup>.

MOVISIE also commissioned intriguing research into the value of EVC for 'vulnerable volunteers'. It was found that EVC as a social intervention tool was successfully implemented for the target group of 'vulnerable volunteers' in society: people with a mental and/or physical vulnerability and who are at a considerable distance from the labour market (Michon, et al, 2013). Vulnerable people increase their employment opportunities by undertaking voluntary work. The general competences that they can bring into the picture, provide guidance and insight into their social and economic chances. People who go through the entire EVC-process score highly after 12 months, on various aspects of empowerment, such as hope and confidence. This leads to a more active attitude and openness to new challenges. With this method, volunteers literally prove what they are capable of.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.movisie.nl/publicaties/EVC-procedure-vrijwilligerswerk>

### Box 3 Roadmap for validating prior learning in the sports sector

Since 2010, the sports sector has focused on validating prior learning as a guiding principle for a multi-targeted focus on volunteers in the sports sector. The goals are:

1. Stimulating the awareness of the sports-volunteers so that their volunteering is valued,
2. Helping sports-organisations to articulate their need for competencies and embed this need in pro-active competence-management,
3. Matching the already articulated demand for competencies in sports-volunteering and the supply of competencies in education/training within the sports sector and the education sectors.

The implementation of these goals is organised in two streams: one on recognition of formal learning outcomes; and, one on validation of formal/informal/non-formal learning outcomes. The two approaches are:

#### I. Validating Formal Learning Outcomes

1. Matching qualifications from training programmes between sports-unions.
2. Examples were collected and analysed in order to establish a unified methodology on the basis of the learning standards in the sports sector, which is currently in preparation for dissemination.
3. Agreement on validation of generic competences was established in summer 2011.
4. The main product is the (shared) matrix with a procedure for accrediting generic competences between sports-unions (*EVK-afspraak-1*).
5. Matching qualifications from training programmes between sports-unions, VET-schools and higher education institutions.
6. For VET: agreement is already established on recognition of generic competences in (1) direct sports-related training-programmes and (2) indirectly related training-programmes (sectors of education, social work).
7. Product: matrix with procedure for accrediting generic competences in cross-overs between training-programmes of sports-unions and equivalent standards of VET-schools and universities (*EVK-afspraak-2*).
8. Matching international qualifications in the sports sector.
9. Examples are still being collected. Agreement based on linking sports-qualifications to the EQF is expected. The product will be a reference-tool of the NQFs to the EQF.

#### II. Validating formal, informal and non-formal Learning Outcomes

1. Matching competences based on prior learning outcomes from a formal, informal and non-formal context is one step further than the preceding three programmes on VPL. In this programme the goal is to pilot groups of sports-volunteers in their process of obtaining offers of education in VET and HE.

The procedure consists of the following steps:

- a self-assessment of skills and competencies,
- an intake-procedure (assessment),
- a tailor-made learning-offer from the VET/HE institution.

## 3 Links to national qualification systems

With the publication of *De Fles is Half Vol!* ("The glass is half full!") in 2000, the first step towards lifelong learning using the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL; *EVC* or *Erkenning van Verworven Competenties*, in Dutch) was taken in the Netherlands. With 'accreditation', the focus in the policy lay initially on accrediting prior learning outcomes against national qualification standards. Until 2006, this 'narrow' approach to prior learning outcomes was the prevailing one.

With the change of focus by EVC to quality-assurance in 2006, the Dutch government started to stimulate and subsidise the development of a national infrastructure for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. This meant that a 'wider' approach to utilising prior learning outcomes was chosen. The Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) became the main focus and broadened the perspective of capitalising on prior learning outcomes. This approach included not only linkages to national qualifications but also to sector standards, function profiles, career-paths and citizenship-activities. This was one of the reasons the Interdepartmental Project Unit for Learning & Working (PLW) was set up. The broader aim was to stimulate adult learning and to enlarge the accessibility and flexibility of formal education for adults. The aim in 2016 is to boost adult learning in combination with work, without focusing specifically on one or more key skills, but rather on programmes combining work and study that lead to a qualification and better opportunities in the job market. The *Ervaringscertificaat* is used – amongst other VPL-instruments – to assess and recognise prior learning competences. The broadening of the pathways of VPL in 2016 is about widening the perspective of what EVC brings to Dutch citizens.

The knowledge centre on VPL (*Kenniscentrum EVC*) started up in 2000. Its initial role was stimulating the development and implementation of EVC. Later, from 2006 until 2016, it has been responsible for supporting the Quality Code for EVC (see § 8). This code was strengthened in June 2012 by the signing of a national tripartite covenant, signed by the Ministry of Education, the trade unions and the employers' organisations, broadening the tasks allocated to the Kenniscentrum (Staatscourant, 2012). As well as its quality assurance role, outlined in the Quality Code, the covenant set out objectives relating to stimulating the actual usage of EVC, to implement EVC as a labour market and guidance tool and to also incorporate sector standards into the EVC-process. The covenant offered a national framework for the further design and implementation of validation. Both government and social partners took responsibility for the development of EVC in this period.

In the new dual approach, effective since 2016, the objectives of the adult learner are central to VPL, either for employability or for obtaining a formal qualification. The current management role of the Ministry of Education for the quality control of VPL providers in both the labour market route and the educational route will be phased out. With ensuring the quality of validation in the education route as an integrated part of the regular quality assurance in education, a separate quality assurance of VPL providers within in the education route will no longer be necessary.

The quality control in the labour market route is managed by the Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC. In 2015, the social partners prepared a quality label for VPL providers in the labour market route. The National Kenniscentrum EVC (part of the Stichting Examenkamer) will ensure the quality of the VPL procedures and promote the civil effect of the 'ervaringscertificaat'. Furthermore, the Nationaal kenniscentrum EVC will set up a register for administrating people's 'ervaringscertificaat'.

#### *VPL & The National Framework for Qualifications*

The Dutch Qualifications Framework (NLQF) describes the formal Dutch qualification levels. It is a systematic organisation of all existing qualification levels in the Netherlands, from Level 1 (basic education) to the Master's degree at level 7 and a Doctorate's degree at level 8. Qualifications are classified in NLQF levels and are given a level indication. The framework consists of an Entry Level followed by 8 levels, Level 1 being the least complex and Level 8 the most complex.

The NLQF aims to facilitate learning and labour market mobility by providing insight into the levels of qualifications recorded by the National Coordination Point (NCP) in the NCP register. The NLQF provides transparency in that it facilitates a comparison of qualification levels at national and European level and thus facilitating labour market mobility.

All the Government-regulated qualifications (the qualifications of the Ministries of Education Culture and Sciences; Economic Affairs; Food and Natural and Living Environment) in the National Coordination Point (NCP) have had an NLQF-level since 2011.

All other qualifications are first assessed and level determined by the NCP and then recorded in the Register.

For (sector-) organisations it is possible to have their standards validated against one of the NLQF-levels. The result of this can be that a sector-standard that is used for learning or career advice in the labour market route can be registered on a specific NLQF-level. A VPL procedure giving a picture of an individual's knowledge, skills and competences against a chosen sector or occupational area can function as VPL standards.

## 4 Standards

An EVC procedure can be used to assess and recognise the competences (both vocational and general) of a candidate in relation to the standards (finishing levels) of an internal or sector standard (branch or sector qualification), MBO (VET qualification), HBO (HE qualification in universities of applied science and the Open University) qualification. This assessment results in an *Ervaringscertificaat*. This certificate can be used as an independent document that proves the value of the experiences measured in terms of a qualification. Candidates are free to choose what they want to do with their certificate (career development or further learning).

As mentioned, all government regulated qualifications are incorporated in the NLQF. All other qualifications are first assessed and the level determined by the NCP and then recorded in the NCP Register. The NCP opens up – in theory – all standards (national and sectoral) and makes it possible to link them to personal formal, non-formal and informal learning outcomes that are validated and reported in an *Ervaringscertificaat*. In this context, the concept of a standard could lead to the recognition of functioning on a specific NLQF-level as well. This is a kind of 'level recognition' which can be a stimulus for individual decision-making on further learning and/or career steps.

Qualifications in branches, VET and HE (only bachelors of professional universities - HBO) are translated into competences and for many qualifications put into a VPL-procedure. Notably, VET is based on a learning outcomes approach in theory. This is called the competence-base of VET in which all national standards embedded in VET are formulated in terms of competences. In January 2012, the final step was taken to turn VET into a vocational-oriented learning system based on skills and competences (Wetten, 2012).

In theory, a full diploma can be granted on the basis of EVC if the applicant can prove his or her learning outcomes are in line with the expected learning outcomes of a diploma. In practice this is very difficult for schools and universities to implement. For VET-schools there are better opportunities for candidates to get access to and exemptions from a specific programme. This is because VET is based on a national qualification system in which all diplomas are based on the same competences across the country. For universities, it is different due to their autonomy in designing their own learning pathways for obtaining nationally agreed learning outcomes.

In many sectors VPL is part of the human resources management (HRM) approach. The focus lies on sustainable employability and mobility of the workforce. The use of VPL is strongly linked to these initiatives in which sector programmes for non-formal learning are used as standards in the VPL-process. The next step in this process is making links between national and sector standards through the Dutch Qualifications Framework (NLQF).

## 5 Organisations and institutions involved in validation arrangements and its coordination

### *Providers of EVC*

In the Dutch EVC-system, every organisation can become an EVC-provider, as long as they work according to the EVC-quality code and have themselves evaluated by an evaluating organisation. The quality code for EVC itself aims to achieve more transparency and comparability and make APL more accessible. The evaluation is demanded every 18 months and for every domain of standards of the EVC-provider (for example finance or logistics). The providers that are certified are registered in the National Register for accredited EVC-procedures within a specific domain/sector. These EVC-providers are called 'registered providers'. Most of the EVC-providers are organisations for vocational education or for higher

professional education, and also private schools. However, there is a growing number of EVC-providers with different backgrounds such as intermediate organisations, sector organisations and career management organisations.

### Quality code EVC

1. The goal of EVC is to define, evaluate and accredit individual competences.
2. EVC primarily answers to the need of the individual. Entitlements and arrangements are clearly defined and guaranteed.
3. Procedures and instruments are reliable and based on solid standards.
4. Assessors and counsellors are competent, impartial and independent.
5. The quality of the EVC-procedure is guaranteed and is being improved on an on-going basis.

When registered in the Quality Code for EVC (see § 8), any organisation may offer EVC-procedures that can lead to a formal *Ervaringscertificaat*. This registration process entails a number of steps concerning the quality of the process offered, the quality of staff involved and the independence of the organisation (Kenniscentrum EVC, 2006):

1. The goal of EVC is to define, evaluate and accredit individual competencies. The accreditation of prior learning has a value in and of itself and contributes to employability. In many cases, EVC can be a benefit to further career-related personal development.
2. Individual entitlements: the EVC process answers to the need of the individual. Entitlements and arrangements with the EVC-offering organisations are clearly defined.
3. Procedure and instruments are reliable and based on solid standards. Trust is the key issue. Trust has to do with civil effect, properly defined standards, and clear information on the way in which assessments are conducted and the arguments on the basis of which conclusions are drawn.
4. Assessors and supervisors are competent, independent and impartial. Independence and impartiality are crucial factors in the evaluation and are rooted in the roles and responsibilities of the assessors involved in the process. It is of major importance to avoid unnecessary confusion of roles. Impartiality can be reinforced by training and the use of networks.
5. The quality of APL<sup>2</sup> procedures is guaranteed and is being improved on an on-going basis. The quality of the APL procedure and the set of instruments used is guaranteed.

Evaluations are conducted regularly. The results are incorporated into improvement actions. Since the formal EVC-procedure is taking place independently from the awarding of exemptions or full qualifications, both public and private organisations can be registered as an official EVC-provider or supplier.

Auditing organisations assess the performance of the providers on a regular basis and provide statements on the implementation of the Quality Code in the policy and the performance of the providers.

### Responsibilities are divided amongst a range of stakeholders:

- Government

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<sup>2</sup> Whenever APL is mentioned in this report, this is solely linked to national qualifications. Therefore, this entails the 'narrow' utilisation of prior learning outcomes, whereas VPL is designed to offer the broader perspective of not just linkages to national qualifications but also to sector standards, function profiles, etc.

In the new dual approach, the responsibilities of the Ministry of Education are geared towards the education route. The focus of the government in this route is on stimulating lifelong learning for adult workers and jobseekers for obtaining national qualifications. With ensuring the quality of validation in the education route, as an integrated part of the regular quality assurance in education, a separate quality assurance of VPL providers within in the education route will no longer be necessary.

#### ■ Social partners

The social partners in the Netherlands traditionally negotiate with the government on all aspects concerning the regulation of the labour market. This includes division of responsibilities in the learning market: initial education and training of jobseekers are the primary responsibility of the government; and, the training of employees is the primary responsibility of the social partners. This therefore also affects the introduction of EVC-systems for employees and jobseekers (Eurydice, Cedefop, ETF, 2003).

The social partners are so-called 'covenant-partners', meaning they take responsibility together with the government for promoting and maintaining a high quality national system of EVC.

Social partners stimulate the use of EVC through collective labour agreements. Employees have the right to EVC in certain collective labour agreements. In collective labour agreements the social partners in specific sectors also agree that Training and Development funds can be used for the valuation of personal competences of employees. Sometimes they even agree on using the fund for giving learning vouchers to the employees. The Training and Development fund provides the portfolio models, internal assessors and guidance. Since the end of the 1990s, many sectors (e.g. house painting industry, meat industry, construction industry, process industry, education, public services, the care sector), have set up initiatives regarding EVC at their (sector) level. In most cases social partners, sector organisations and accredited EVC-providers are involved in setting up EVC procedures.

#### ■ Stichting Examenkamer – Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC

The social partners (employers and trade unions) give great importance to a sound and well-secured VPL procedure and the result of 'Ervaringscertificaten' that portrays the personal qualities of employees. They asked the Foundation (Stichting Examenkamer) to implement the "Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC" for utilizing the labour market route as a follow-up of the previous Kenniscentrum EVC, which was maintained by the Ministry of Education. The main differences between 'old' and 'new' are the shift in governance from government to social partners and the embedding of the new centre in not only national qualifications but also in sector-standards. Its mission is to secure the quality of VPL as a labour instrument and the reliability of VPL as a procedure for employability and lifelong learning with personal, social and labour impact. The new *kenniscentrum* (The National VPL Knowledge Centre) also aims at providing information, advice and guidance to candidates (Staatscourant, 2015).

The quality control in the labour market route is managed by the Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC. In 2015, the social partners prepared a quality label for VPL providers in the labour market route. The National Kenniscentrum EVC (part of the Stichting Examenkamer) will ensure the quality of the VPL procedures and promote the civil effect of the 'ervaringscertificaat'. Furthermore, the Nationaal kenniscentrum EVC will set up a register for administrating people's 'ervaringscertificaat'.

## 6 Information, advice and guidance

### 6.1 Awareness-raising and recruitment

Raising awareness of the necessity and opportunities of lifelong learning for individuals in any given context is at the heart of the process of Validating Learning. Without this, learning will remain school- or company-led and cannot effectively be based on individuals' motivations and ambitions.

Most of all, an individual has to be self-aware of his/her own competences; of the value s/he is giving him/herself to these competences; and, the value it has for others in certain contexts at certain moments. Being able to keep up your competences in a 'made-to-measure way' is vital for this understanding.

The '*Ervaringsprofiel*' is used especially for generating motivation for looking into one's development so far and answering the question of what's the next step going to be in this development. For instance, this is the core of a structured training for answering these two questions with the CH-Q System of Managing Competencies. This system is dedicated to strengthening links between the personal and professional development of young people and adults and their socio-economic integration. The overall objective is to enable them to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills of how to handle a sustainable career and life planning. This implies adequate training and guidance. The training concept is based on an extensive set of methods addressing all issues in career management. The solution oriented learning processes are centred around the identification, assessment and recognition of skills and competencies and they are backed up by accompanying instruments for young people and adults (print and electronic version). The latter include folders of competencies (Portfolios), of qualifications (formal, informal evidences) and of applications, as well as special instruments to prepare validation and accreditation procedures (Schoor 2011; [www.ch-q.nl](http://www.ch-q.nl)).

For organisations it is vital to understand that investing in 'their' people also means investing in the goals of their own organisation. This awareness needs to culminate in setting specific targets for the investment in individuals and the support the organisation can give to this human resource development.

Providing information is mainly performed at the bottom-level of learning- and working processes where informing the people for whom EVC is meant, comes to reality: workers, jobseekers, volunteers, 'private lifers', etc. In practice awareness-raising activities are targeted at specific target groups: minorities, jobseekers, youth-groups, special needs groups.

### 6.2 Information, advice and guidance

Apart from the newly established "Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC", all registered EVC-providers have the obligation to offer good information and advice on why, how and when to enter a validation-procedure. In practice, information and guidance concerning EVC is distributed on different levels:

- On macro-level – distributed by the ministry of education and the social partners, including the Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC;
- On meso-level – distributed by the sector partners (employers and trade unions);
- On micro level of organisations – distributed by HR departments and internal EVC 'ambassadors'; and,

- By any registered EVC-provider, as noted above. They are the main source for people interested in VPL.

In addition, a regional structure has been set up with Leer Werk Loketten<sup>3</sup> across the country. Everyone – job-seeker, employee and employer – can visit such a centre and receive free advice on learning and working opportunities. These centres are a linking-pin between training providers and the labour market. They (amongst others) facilitate the cooperation between EVC providers, schools (VET and HE) and employees and/or employers, in order to apply EVC as a career-guidance tool.

### 6.3 Measures to enhance the awareness of validation initiatives and practices amongst guidance practitioners

Information and guidance practitioners in the Netherlands are already well informed about validation initiatives and practices since they are working independently from the learning and working systems to which they need to link people (their customers).

They focus on the main motivations for interest in EVC, which are based on a diversity of motivators, mainly employability- and qualification-oriented:

Extrinsic motivators:

- the employer wants me to work as a qualified worker
- I need the qualification for a raise or a job-opportunity
- I need to show my potential for a *careerstep*
- I want to get exemptions for a shortened course.

Intrinsic motivators:

- Investing in oneself; learning as a fun-factor
- I feel awarded when offered an EVC-procedure.

In this respect, these practitioners are well aware of the bottlenecks in raising awareness on the value of EVC:

- Power of the standards: lack of acceptance at schools/universities that people might have learned outside of the classroom.
- The general idea that EVC is a lot of effort for obtaining a qualification or job-change. It is sometimes not perceived as added value for the organisation as a whole. Some good practices, like Rockwool and the welfare sector, highlight there is added value to staff and organisation.

The practitioners are best outfitted for their role when being able to stress the benefits of EVC for the individual and offer role-models on:

- investing in yourself can be fun and enjoyable,
- opening up career-opportunities,
- empowering effect of self-valuation,
- formal growth in obtaining formal qualifications,

<sup>3</sup> A 'leer werk loket' is a central place where all information can be found in the region on careers, training and combining learning and work.

- target-setting in learning opens up more than just working potential; it's about life as well,
- validation incorporates learning outcomes of volunteering or citizenship too.

## 7 Validation practitioners

### 7.1 Profile of validation practitioners

In general validation practitioners are recruited from different professional groups (teachers and trainers; counsellors public/private; personnel managers, etc.). They all attend training programmes for the specific validation-responsibilities they are applying for. Practitioners fulfil various functions:

- *assessors*: the professionals who assess individuals when they want to apply EVC for summative purposes;
- *portfolio-advisers*: the professionals who help people fill in their portfolio;
- *developers/advisors*: the professionals who develop EVC-procedures based on national standards; they also advise on this.
- *teacher-trainers*: the professionals who train the assessors and advisers.

For each of these functions, expertise in the EVC-field is expected. They all need to master a common set of competences, on different levels. Developers/advisors and teacher-trainers are advised to participate in a structured training so that they understand the integral process of EVC.

### 7.2 Qualification requirements

According to the Quality Code for EVC, only professionals can be EVC supervisors and assessors/advisers and their competences must be documented. Until now, EVC providers can choose their own methods in proving the capability of their EVC-professionals. There is no official certificate for the various EVC-functions available, nor a standard or qualification for assessors in the Netherlands.

Proposals to create a standard for assessors which entails a system with standards and quality-assurance have been made. These options were already formulated in the national policy paper from 2000 of the *Werkgroep EVC* (The glass is half full), but have not yet been taken up. The main option is to enhance an accreditation scheme for assessors and to evaluate the quality of assessors on the basis of a national standard, including a training course for assessors. Such a national standard (for internal company and external assessors) has not yet been formulated. In practice the EVC providers have their own competence profiles for assessors. Due to the EVC Quality-code they are however all obliged to use the same format for filling in the reports after the assessment. Therewith a certain degree of comparability and quality-assurance is maintained.

A study, conducted by the Kenniscentrum EVC (Dungen, Heuts & Venema, 2012) on whether this is appropriate or whether other accreditation forms are necessary and a more elaborated description of acquired competences is needed to ensure the sustainable quality of EVC, came up with recommendations concerning the professionalisation of EVC-functions.

An important recommendation referred to distinguishing between an EVC-assessor and a general assessor as EVC-assessors need specific competences.

### 7.3 Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

The training of validation practitioners is ensured by registered EVC-providers and by (public and private) training-institutes within VET-schools (ROC's; MBO) and HE (HBO).

There is no formal national standard. Practitioners must (according to the quality code for APL):

- Understand key concepts and benefits of EVC.
- Review and analyse models of recognition and accreditation of prior learning.
- Analyse and develop the skills, knowledge and processes required to support EVC practice.
- Understand and apply the EVC process.
- Reflect on the impact of EVC on their professional learning, practice and their educational setting.
- Understand the organisation, management and marketing of EVC

The common set of competences (Duvekot & Geerts 2012) for EVC-processes consists of competences on:

- *Reviewing*: the assessor/adviser is able to adequately provide an assessment of the competences of the participant, using a number of common competency-based assessment forms, such as the portfolio, the criterion-based interview and practical simulations. They can apply these assessment forms integrally within an EVC-procedure. The assessor/adviser is able to perform an assessment on the basis of a standard (competency-profile), to assess the provided evidence of the candidate on the basis of the prevailing assessment-criteria and to assess answers of a participant using the standard.
- *Observing*: the assessor/adviser is able to adequately observe the participant and to link an assessment-report to this observation, in relation to the standard that was used as a basis for the assessment.
- *Interviewing*: the assessor/adviser is able, by using specific questions and interview techniques in an assessment-situation, to make the competences of the participant transparent and to compare these competences in the interview with the standard. The assessor/adviser asks questions to investigate the value of the personal experiences (competences, knowledge and skills).
- *Providing feedback*: the assessor/adviser is able to provide feedback to the participant in a constructive and motivating way and to indicate the results of the assessment, customised to the level of the participant. The assessor/adviser can explain and substantiate the decisions based on the assessment and indicate at which points the participant is competent. N.B. only if this is part of the procedure however it may also be done by the adviser.
- *Written communication*: the assessor/adviser is able to write a clear, detailed and structured assessment report. The assessor/adviser describes the competences of the participant that are valid for the used standard. Personal characteristics are only added when applicable.
- *(additional) Technical competence* (depending on a national learning culture, this competence can be added): the assessor/adviser is technically competent and must have sufficient experience and qualifications in the appropriate discipline (professionally). The assessor can prove that they have sufficient technical skills and is willing to keep abreast of developments in the sector. The technical level of the assessor must be at

least as high as that of the participant. The assessor/adviser is familiar with the assessment (EVC) procedure and objectives, the assessment tools and the methodology. The assessor/adviser is familiar with the sector or company standards (job descriptions, qualification profiles) and has knowledge of the labour market and vocational education programmes for the sake of the assessment.

Furthermore, in the ERASMUS+ project, *European Studies and Research in Adult Learning and Education* (ESRALE; with project Number 540117-LLP-1-2013-1-DE-ERASMUS-EQMC), the Foundation EC-VPL ([www.ec-vpl.eu](http://www.ec-vpl.eu)) is developing four learning modules on assessment, on vocational guiding, on Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) methodology and on self-management of competences. This learning programme will be integral and linked to a master programme to enhance and encourage the transition from studying to research and to benefit from the experience of the practitioners. VPL-systematics aim at helping practitioners to explore pedagogies and practices and develop their own practice, within their own organisational context, for their own specific purposes. VPL is about making a personal inventory of learning outcomes so far and being able to decide on the need for further learning. Moreover, VPL-systematics are suitable for practitioners operating in lifelong learning contexts and wanting to enhance learning opportunities and VPL experiences. The four modules will be finalised in a European summer school in July 2016.

#### Box 4 VPL in the youth and welfare sector

The youth and welfare sector provides a good example of VPL embedded in HRM-policies of welfare-institutions. In 2011-2012, a pilot project on VPL was initiated. The project focuses on the promotion from the level of group leader to that of senior group leader in the Welfare sector. Prior work experience and learning outcomes are assessed and recognised in a VPL procedure, using both sector standards as well as HE qualifications (Ervaring, 2012). Since 2012, this pilot led to the official accreditation of the sector-standard in the national qualification framework on level 6 (bachelor level).

An examination committee of the university evaluates the VPL-report of the candidate that was obtained as part of the first stage of VPL procedure for a qualification-programme (including portfolio and assessment). The aim of this evaluation is to either obtain directly the HE-qualification that is linked to the sector-standard for senior group leader or to access a tailor-made learning programme, taking into account prior learning outcomes and filling in the remaining learning targets in the HE-programme.

Fifteen candidates, from one youth care institute, participated in the VPL-programme. Of these, 13 received a VPL-report (or in formal Dutch procedure 'a national experience certificate' that is obligatory when accessing HE by means of VPL). This report is the basis for programming further development and learning for the candidate. In addition, the candidates could also receive a sector-certificate if they complied with all criteria on the sector-standard. Only one candidate received this certificate during the pilot-phase.

The VPL-procedure was managed by a VPL-manager from the university, two portfolio-advisers (from the university and from the employer) and two assessors (internal-university and external-sector).

The exam committee from the department of Pedagogics (Professional HE) acknowledged the sector-standard as a relevant standard to match with the HE-standard of Pedagogics. A matrix for general comparison was designed and used by the exam committee.

Furthermore, all stakeholders also acknowledged the relevance and value of both standards (sector and national ones) and the steps in the VPL-process.

This project is interesting because it offers recognition of prior learning towards higher vocational education qualifications for experienced youth workers. Furthermore, VPL is used in a multiple targeted policy for employability (formative) and qualification (summative). This multiple-targeted VPL is used at the welfare-institute for linking two purposes: a) the purpose of addressing an

employee's learning needs (knowing how to invest best in yourself), and b) for creating horizontal and/or vertical employability chances (knowing where to arrive to reach one's best potential).

## 8 Quality assurance

The National Quality Code for EVC (based on the 'European Common Principles for Recognition and Validation of Non-formal and Informal Competencies') was initiated in 2006 as an instrument for stimulating the use of EVC in VET and HE (PLW, 2009), by creating control and trust in the quality of EVC-providers.

In early 2010, the Minister of Education took control of the execution of 'the Quality Code EVC'. This followed a critical evaluation by the Inspectorate of Education of the quality of the accredited EVC providers (PLW 2009, IvO 2010). In this evaluation, the quality of all accredited EVC providers, both on the levels of VET as well as of HE was regarded as insufficient. In general, the conclusions of the evaluation were:

- the Dutch Quality Code functions properly, but there is a question of ownership. Specifically the decision about which organisations can inspect the providers of the *Ervaringscertificaat* needs to be regulated;
- the quality of the providers differs too much in the implementation of the assessments; and,
- the outcomes of the assessments (*'Ervaringscertificaten'*) are not easily transferable between the providers.

The State Secretary of Education, Culture and Science therefore took control of the EVC-process. It is intended that during a period of three years the bottlenecks in the process should be overcome.

In 2012, the code was upgraded to a tripartite governed quality-instrument. Government, employers and trade unions declared by signing the *EVC-convenant* that EVC was now – on top of the qualification-instrument – also to be grounded as a labour market tool for career guidance (Vsl EVC, 2012).

The new code resulted from a broad consultation process among all stakeholders and agreement by all parties on the following:

- The use of the code is voluntary, but the signing **arrangements'** parties dedicate themselves to promoting the use of the Quality code for APL.
- Everyone who begins an APL-procedure must agree on the reasons for doing so. APL is not a standard process but an individualised series of arrangements customised to the goal and use of APL. Customisation is the norm.
- Every EVC-procedure ends with a standardised<sup>4</sup> EVC report called *Ervaringscertificaat* (Certificate of Experience). This report states that the individual has documentation of the competencies he possesses.
- Accredited EVC providers are listed in an APL database. This database contains information about all the APL procedures that are useful for potential APL candidates.

The 2012 update of the quality code served the purposes of – first of all – bringing together the main stakeholders (government, employers and trade unions) as covenant partners: with

<sup>4</sup> Information on how this standardisation is achieved can be found on the website of the [Kenniscentrum EVC](#)

this shift, some initial partners in the 2006 Code, such as the education boards of VET-schools (MBO) and universities of applied sciences (HBO) were given more freedom in promoting EVC. Another purpose was to link the initial code to certification on branch- or sector-levels.

With the creation of a dualistic system of validation since 2016, with a national qualification and a sector-based qualification orientation, the quality assurance of VPL has also been divided. For both systems, the existing quality code remains the foundation of the quality assurance. The difference is that the quality of VPL for national qualifications remains a responsibility of the Ministry of Education, while the ministry has integrated this in existing procedures for quality-assurance in the education system. The responsibility for the labour market route on the other hand is, since 2016, a task of the Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC and governed by the social partners.

The quality control in the labour market route is managed by the Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC. In 2015, the social partners prepared a quality label for VPL providers in the labour market route. The National Kenniscentrum EVC (part of the Stichting Examenkamer) will ensure the quality of the VPL procedures and promote the civil effect of the 'ervaringscertificaat'. Furthermore, the Nationaal kenniscentrum EVC will set up a register for administrating people's 'ervaringscertificaat'.

## 8.1 Quality assurance systems / procedures

As noted above, the government has taken the lead on the national Quality Code for EVC since 2006 and confirmed its role in doing so in the updated version of the covenant of 2012. In this code the criteria are mentioned for certified EVC-procedures and for the format of EVC reports, etc. The bottlenecks in the system that existed from the start however still need to be overcome (IvO, 2012).

The same research also pointed out that EVC providers need to improve the quality of the process of obtaining the assessment.

Thanks to the successful introduction of the EVC Quality Code there is now a better overview of the quality procedures applied to vocational competence-standards in VET and HE. The standards for EVC procedures are connected with the requirements in VET and HE. The examination committee has its own responsibility for awarding against the outcomes of an EVC assessment. There are no official regulations for using the outcomes of an independent EVC procedure for composing a learning path for an individual student to obtain a degree and/or diploma, except for the fact that institutions have to accept applicants for exemptions based on (evidence of) non-formally and formally acquired competences. There are no rules on limits concerning the amount of credits to be given based on an assessment. Thus, EVC procedures are developed on the basis of the competence standards of VET and HE (and in this way actually based on the expected learning outcomes in these standards), while implementing the national Quality Code for EVC.

The recognised providers are included in the EVC Register, which clearly indicates to citizens and employers where they can have a customised procedure. The foundation for quality assurance of EVC is still strong and the government and social partners want to keep on investing in this and broadening its scope.

## 8.2 Evaluation framework

Apart from the monitoring and evaluation that is carried out under the Quality Code, concerning the quality of the accredited EVC-providers, there is no official framework for qualitative and quantitative evaluation of progress and practice of EVC in the Netherlands.

There is incidental research into the quantity, impact and quality-aspects of EVC (Profitwise, 2011; Ecorys, 2012). Research is also carried out into the success and failure factors of the APL-market and the effects of EVC for the individual and the organisation (Dungen et al, 2012). The main outcomes of this research were:

- There are, in principal, no barriers to the provision of exemptions for examinations and/or tests.
- There are no barriers to the provision of exemptions for educational components.
- The quality of EVC providers and the Ervaringscertificaat deserves continued attention.
- The quality of the evaluating organisations must be secured.
- Professionalisation of members of examination boards is very important.
- There should be more opportunities for further development after the issuing of an Ervaringscertificaat.
- The interplay between EVC-providers and examination boards can be improved by better information.

## 9 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

### 9.1 Funding

EVC is financed in different ways by different stakeholders, depending on the context in which EVC is applied: in the education route or in the labour market route.

#### *Employees*

EVC is financed by individual employers and/or Sectoral Training and Development Funds.

Larger companies (with more than 500 employees) which have incorporated EVC into their human resource management (HRM), self-finance the application of EVC.

Many SMEs are supported in the application of EVC by the sectoral training funds, originally set up to support educational initiatives for employees in the sector (Duvekot et al, 2005). A good example of such a sector-steered model is offered by the A+O Fonds Gemeenten (Training fund for city-workers). The costs for obtaining an *Ervaringscertificaat* in the sector vary from EUR 700-1 500. The costs of other methods for valuing one's learning outcomes (e-portfolio, competence test, etc.) are very diversified and depend on the range of learning outcomes, level and objective; there are no data on specified costs available for these other methods. Part of these costs are tax-deductible for the employer; on top of this the Fund covers an amount of EUR 1 000 per employee when EVC is part of a career-guided trajectory, providing that the employee has not been involved in a similar trajectory in the last three years. (A+O, 2013).

In 2013, the government and the social partners agreed on a joint sector-approach. The government will co-finance sector plans for revitalising the specific sector with an annual budget of EUR 300 million for the coming two years. In total this amounts to a budget for co-financing of EUR 600 million in 2014-2015 (SZW, 2013). The extent to which this budget will also be used for further developing and implementing VPL-strategies is depending on the plans that the sectors are designing. In general, one can state that VPL will benefit due to its generally recognised status of 'a bridge between a personal portfolio and an existing or future task within a sector'. Furthermore, most sectors and their sector training funds – which will be used for co-financing these sector plans – are very familiar with EVC.

Together the government and the social partners identified seven themes that are expected to contribute to a better structural functioning of the labour market and also have a positive impact on the short term. A sector plan must address at least two of the seven themes. An example to improve long-term employability through career scans, staff pools between companies so that employees do not need to be unnecessarily redundant, EVC and apprenticeships for young people. From 1 October 2013, sectors submitted their plans to the Ministry. A sector plan has a maximum duration of two years from the date of the grant.

#### *Job-seekers*

A temporary measure taken by the government in 2009 (UWV, 2013) supports jobseekers' to access EVC. Employers who need to make redundancies because of the economic crisis can offer the employees concerned a procedure for an *Ervaringscertificaat* or an *Ervaringsprofiel*. The scheme is targeted at three different specific groups: young unemployed persons without a starting qualification, the unemployed and employed people at risk of losing their jobs. For the young unemployed, only those who do not hold a Level 2 vocational qualification are eligible. The other two groups can use the measure to access qualifications up to the level of HBO, to support their mobility on the labour market. The cost of this procedure is subsidised by the employment agencies, UWV. The amount is limited to EUR 600 for an *Ervaringsprofiel* and EUR 1 300 for an *Ervaringscertificaat*. Depending on

the number of employees of the company, half of the costs are subsidised (more than 25 employees) or all costs are subsidised (less than 25 employees).

#### *EVC in the learning context*

Since 2015, EVC is part of the education route and used for obtaining exemptions therewith embedded in the programming of VET-schools (ROCs) and universities of applied sciences. Further, the Open University offers EVC in some of its programmes. Some VET schools and universities also hold a licence as accredited EVC-providers.

For HE institutions (public and private funded), there is an experimentation opportunity for adult learning programming. Programmes (at bachelor/masters level) need to offer flexible, modularised, blended learning and need to be integrated with validation instrumentation. More than 32 HE institutions applied for this funding opportunity and, as a result, 20 applications were approved for flexibilising more than 500 programmes for adult learners. (Besluit MOCW, 2015)

In the case of getting access to and exemptions for a qualification by means of EVC, the education institutes that offer EVC to learners, since 2015, need to have EVC integrated in their process. The candidate doesn't necessarily need to secure his/her own funding for EVC anymore since – when it is offered by the institute – it needs to be integrated in the learning offer.

## 9.2 Distribution of costs

As noted above EVC is financed in different ways by different stakeholders.

A number of other general comments can be made in relation to the costs to organisations of implementing EVC:

- When applying EVC in the labour market route, by using the Ervaringscertificaat for valuing one's learning outcomes, it is a commercial activity. Compensation for the procedure and the assessment is possible through fiscal facilities (such as income tax relief on costs for education) for employees and unemployed persons looking for jobs.
- Many Collective Labour Agreements in the sectors include a paragraph on compensation for employers and/or employees, using EVC.

When EVC is not funded by the government or the social partners, the individual user can fiscally deduct the costs for EVC in case of an accredited VPL-procedure. All costs above EUR 250 are tax-deductible.

EVC is meant to prevent unnecessary learning; in this way any investment in an EVC procedure is about lowering the real costs of learning, as stipulated with the publication of the national policy concerning EVC in the Netherlands in 2000, under the title of 'The glass is half full'.

## 9.3 Evidence of benefits to individuals

EVC can be used:

- as the basis for further informal or non-formal development of the individual;
- in the labour market for further career building and non-formal lifelong learning opportunities;
- for obtaining a full qualification when the individual has met all required learning outcomes that were defined for this qualification; and,
- as a basis to get exemptions in education, if not all required learning outcomes were met and the individual does not wish to attend formal education and training again.

While the majority of providers conducts in practice only a summative APL, a formative assessment (which is the variant of the more open form of VPL) can also be used in the context of career development with the aim of identifying training needs and adjusting training programmes accordingly.

The benefits of EVC are considered high, especially when the EVC-process not only covers summative but also formative effects. Although the summative APL still holds its value, the formative APL is slowly but gradually developing. State of the art research shows that the summative aims and (potential) benefits are still the main priority of both organisations as well as individuals (Profitwise, 2011; Ecorys, 2012; EVC in de markt, 2013; Duvekot, 2016), but the utilisation of formative steered EVC is growing in importance. In general, one can state that the role and value of EVC in the Netherlands is considered as being very valuable for objectives of (further) development of people in both learning and working contexts.

The 'fire service' sets a good example of the benefits for all when fire workers themselves take responsibility in setting up a validation-process. The job structure of the fire department is linked to qualification levels. The employees generally can determine their own career plan. They have a fairly free choice of setting projects for their professional development, and even to access the organisation's unallocated budget for development of employees. The employees for instance can choose a development pathway at a university, which first facilitated VPL prior to the courses (VPL for getting access to a learning programme; summative validation), and secondly integrated VPL into the course itself as a means for assessment for learning (formative use of VPL). In this sense, there is already a certain extent of participation from the fire service employees in VPL. For the fire service, it was found necessary to have a career development policy which gave employees freedom and flexibility within their own career development, partly because of the age-related retirement policy.

Although the firefighter is quite free to determine the objective and direction of learning within the learning triangle, including the manner in which previously acquired personal learning can play a role, the fire department itself is rather less preoccupied with embracing learning experiences acquired outside of the fire service; even subjects in formal learning programmes such as upper secondary vocational education (VET) and higher professional education (HE) are barely recognised in the job structure (Source: Duvekot, 2016)

## 9.4 Beneficiaries and users of validation processes

### 9.4.1 Validation trends

The number of *Ervaringscertificaten* has increased from 9 900 in 2007 to 12 500 in 2008 and 15 700 in 2009. This meant that in the period 2007-2009 the number of awarded *Ervaringscertificaten* grew by more than 60 %. The demand for the *Ervaringscertificaat* reached its highest number in 2010 with 22 300 EVC-procedures. This number dropped down to 17 900 in 2011. (Ecorys, 2012).

The majority of all EVC in 2011 – about 65 % – was at the MBO-level of branch, or sector, qualifications. These qualifications are developed and accredited within the sector, but are not part of the national (funded) qualification structure. VET and VET-related training (also MBO-levels or NLQF-levels 1-4) accounted for more than 25 % and EVC at universities of applied sciences for 10 % of all EVC in 2011.

With the adoption of the 'two-routes-strategy' since 2013, almost 17 000 VPL-procedures were reported by the registered VPL-providers (De waarde van EVC, 2014). This number was lowered to an estimate of 9 000 in 2015 (KC EVC, 2015). From 2016, these figures represent the use of EVC in the labour market route where the *ervaringscertificaat* is a major method for valuing people's learning outcomes.

### 9.4.2 Validation users

In the Netherlands, validation is used by all target groups: old and young, male and female, migrants and locals, etc. There is no discrimination when it comes to validation. It also engulfs all levels in terms of qualifications and function-standards and covers almost all sectors and lifelong learning perspectives (qualification, employability, participation, personal development).

### 9.4.3 Validation and migrants / refugees and other disadvantaged groups

There are no specific initiatives for validation in respect to migrants/refugees and other disadvantaged groups. However, migrants/refugees when officially recognised and accepted in the Netherlands are allowed to focus on obtaining a Dutch qualification or a job in order to participate in Dutch society.

An excellent example of a local initiative involving a women's centre for migrants is listed in the box below.

#### Box 5 The International Women's Centre (IVC)

The International Women's Centre (IVC)<sup>5</sup> in Den Helder aims to contribute to the emancipation, participation and integration of migrant women in the Netherlands.

One of the activities of the IVC is a training for self-management of competences. The aim is to teach the migrant women to describe their personal skills and competences. The outcomes of the training can be used for setting up career opportunities in further learning, in volunteering or paid work, and for embedding their personal life in a country with different cultural customs. During the training the awareness of their personal values and competences is strengthened.

The training is organised according to the Swiss CH-Q method (a Swiss vocational qualifications programme that has developed tools to document skills). CH-Q follows the steps of the VPL-procedure: raising awareness, documentation, presentation, assessment and certification.

The main focus of CH-Q is to enable individuals to manage their own careers, articulate their own development needs and build up their own competencies.

After passing the training and presenting their personal action plan, the students receive an approved certificate. The CH-Q training has been offered since 2009 and is successfully carried out every year (see [www.ch-q.nl](http://www.ch-q.nl) for more detail). The training is offered twice a year; since 2009, 45 migrant women participated in the training; of this group, many found jobs (paid and voluntary work) or started up a study programme at a VET-school or university.

## 10 Validation methods

VPL is a system that strengthens the role of the individual in shaping their lifelong learning. It can demonstrate the outcomes of learning in terms of profit (status, money), efficiency (time, customisation), and fulfilment of personal goals and/or ambition. The independent nature of the assessment of the learning-programme enhances the effects that VPL can create for personal objectives in terms of qualifications, career development and personal meaning. In general, VPL consists of five phases:

1. *Engagement* focuses on being aware that someone has already acquired many formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences that might be valuable. A person can exploit these competences through self-management. A wide range of aspirations may be achievable due to a person's prior experience and can therefore be deployed to

<sup>5</sup> [www.int-vrouwencentrum.nl](http://www.int-vrouwencentrum.nl)

determine an individual learning objective. Such learning objectives range from activation in the person's private life, empowerment, personal development and career development in education and occupation to creating flexibility and mobility in order to access or move up levels or jobs on the labour market.

2. *Recognition and documentation* are focused on identifying and organising actual individual learning experiences and translating them into skills and competences. The description of these competences is then recorded in a portfolio. In addition to this description of the competences acquired through paid and voluntary work, qualifications, leisure activities, etc., the portfolio is supplemented with evidence proving the acquisition of learning, such as certificates, job reviews, references, documents, videos or pictures which substantiate the claim of possessing certain competences.
3. Under *assessment*, the contents of the portfolio are assessed and evaluated. Assessors compare the competences of an individual with a selected yardstick that is used as a reference for the intended learning objective. Depending on the yardstick used, this comparison is used to draw up an advisory opinion on possible validation at personal, organisational, sectoral or national level in the form of certification, career advice or personal valuation. The advice is based on the output of learning outcomes to be validated, and presented by the individual at the assessment. This output is used as a basis for drawing up advice on how the individual can capitalise for their development, and the subsequent steps.
4. The *benefits* from VPL are focused on validating the assessment advice in terms of capitalising on the results (direct benefits), possibly in combination with designing specific learning packages and/or work packages (indirect benefits). In the context of 'learning', a benefit could be the formal acquisition of exemptions from a programme or obtaining an entire qualification. In the context of 'work', it might involve being allocated a particular job, a promotion or a horizontal (same job level) or vertical (another job level) move. Finally, the benefit may also be of personal nature, such as creating a personal profile, self-empowerment, or a plan for personal development. Benefits may create direct or indirect effects. The difference can be described as a cashing-in effect or development-orientated effect.
5. The last phase of the VPL process is *anchoring*, or structural implementation, of VPL in all areas of the individual's life. The results of a VPL-approach may have a structural effect on the personal and social organisation and orientation of all actors. At an individual level, the anchoring of VPL is strongly related to the relevant context. Anchoring is also possible at an organisational level, especially if the organisation wants to be able to use VPL structurally for specific purposes in the context of human resources and learning strategies.

A candidate who wants to reflect on his/her prior learning outcomes in relation to a qualification (as is the case in the 'education route'), has to fill in a portfolio (showcase) in which s/he can demonstrate how his/her learning experiences match with the competences in the qualification s/he has chosen. In an assessment s/he is judged and a report is written stating all the learning outcomes that match with the learning outcomes that are defined for the chosen qualification. With this report s/he can turn to the awarding body (the exam committee) of the VET-school or university. In this way it becomes clear that the outcome of an EVC procedure is foremost an official advice for the candidate with which s/he can go to the awarding body. Only the awarding body is allowed to turn the advice into an official exemption. This awarding body can decide on exemptions in the learning programme. On the basis of these exemptions it is possible to achieve a (partial or full) qualification.

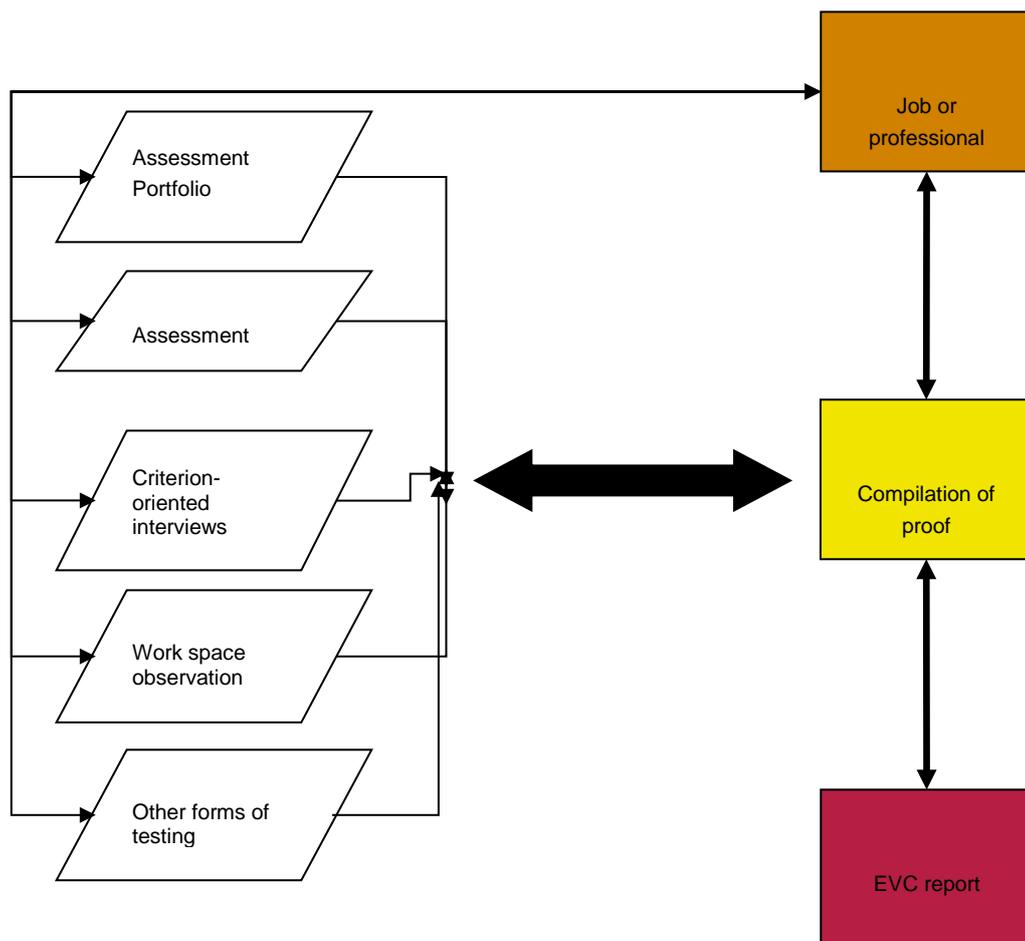
Usually a mix of methods is used in EVC procedures, because every situation and every individual is different. The model illustrated in the diagram below describes some examples of methods that can be used in EVC procedures:

- Portfolio,
- Criterion-oriented interviews,
- Portfolios,
- Observations and workplace-visits,
- Other testing.

In line with the trend of the linkage between VPL and personalised learning, and moreover in the slipstream of the dualistic approach since 2013 in the Netherlands with two pathways for making use of VPL, in general there is evidence building up concerning the types of validation users (Duvekot, 2016):

- VPL's function is to allow users to design or co-design and manage their own learning programmes if they have a broad understanding of their learning experiences and are able to reflect upon these to help their further learning.
- Previously acquired learning experiences can be recorded in a portfolio. The portfolio and the resulting reflexive evaluation and self-evaluation are the control mechanisms available to the user.

**Figure 10.1 EVC Model**



Source: ECI (2008)

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## Country report Netherlands

2016 update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

The 2012 Council recommendation on validation encourages Member States to put in place national arrangements for validation by 2018. These arrangements will enable individuals to increase the visibility and value of their knowledge, skills and competences acquired outside formal education and training: at work, at home or in voluntary activities.

This country report is one of 36 that, together with a synthesis report and thematic reports, constitute the European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning. The inventory is a regularly updated overview of validation practices and arrangements in all Member States, EFTA countries and Turkey. It is a reference point for information on validation in Europe. It is organised around the principles defined in the 2012 Council Recommendation that were further elaborated in the European guidelines for validation. This is its sixth update (2004, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2014 and 2016).



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European Centre for the Development  
of Vocational Training

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Europe 123, 570 01 Thessaloniki (Pylea), GREECE  
PO Box 22427, 551 02 Thessaloniki, GREECE  
Tel. +30 2310490111, Fax +30 2310490020, Email: [info@cedefop.europa.eu](mailto:info@cedefop.europa.eu)

[visit our portal www.cedefop.europa.eu](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu)

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