European Inventory

on validation of informal and non-formal learning

Education and Culture DG

CEDEFOP

Case Study – Validation in the Processing Industry, Netherlands

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 The Dutch processing industry

The Dutch processing industry is a wide-ranging industry comprising for example the food, textile and chemical industries.[1] It is estimated that – using the broad definition of the processing industry - currently a total of 7,750 processing companies are active in the Netherlands with approximately 462,000 employees[2]. The majority work in large companies with 100 employees or more. The chemical and food industries are the largest employers, while the water and electricity sectors are the smallest[3].

Although employment in the processing industry is showing a decline due to reorganisations, company closures and movement to lower-cost countries, the employment prospects in the long term remain positive. This is mostly due to the fact that in the coming five years many employees will take (early) retirement, causing a high replacement demand, whilst the number of school leavers with qualifications suitable for the processing industry remains low[4]. The employment prospects for higher skilled labour are particularly promising, while the employment prospects for lower skilled labour are less encouraging. As a consequence, job seekers with an upper secondary vocational qualification at MBO level 3[5] (senior operator) or MBO level 4 (all-round operator) will find it easier in the Dutch processing industry to find employment than job seekers with an upper secondary vocational qualification at MBO level 1 (assistant operator) or MBO level 2 (operator)[6].

1.2 The use of validation within the industry

The VAPRO-OVP group is a service-delivery knowledge centre which has been created by a consortium of social partners (AWVN[7], VNCI[8], FNV[1] and CNV[2]). It offers services to

[1] Kenniscentrum VAPRO, Arbeidsmarkt- en onderwijs informatie 2006-2007
[2] NIPO, 2004, Marktmonitor procesindustrie
[3] Kenniscentrum VAPRO, Arbeidsmarkt- en onderwijs informatie 2006-2007 -
[4] Kenniscentrum VAPRO, Arbeidsmarkt- en onderwijs informatie 2006-2007
[5] Dutch upper secondary vocation education (MBO, ISCED level 3) comprises of four levels: MBO1, MBO2, MBO3 and MBO4 of which level 4 is the highest.
[6] Kenniscentrum VAPRO, Arbeidsmarkt- en onderwijs informatie 2006-2007
[7] Federation for employers
[8] Association of Dutch chemical industry

enterprises related to the processing industry, environment technical industry and other related sectors in the fields of human resource management, education and subsidies. One of its services concerns the validation of informal and non-formal learning (EVC - *Erkenning Verworven Competenties*) in the Dutch processing industry[3]. Besides validation, the group also undertakes services in human resource development; organises the education of workers through ESF 3 and undertakes legal tasks in Dutch vocational education.

Since 1998, several companies within the processing industry have been using validation tools developed by VAPRO-OVP. Skills typically assessed in the processing industry through validation are operating techniques including maintenance, logistics, etc.

The table below offers a very rough overview of *approximately* how many employees in the processing industry have been engaged in validation, either undertaken directly by VAPRO-OVP or in partnership with VAPRO-OVP. The table shows clearly how the number of employees involved in validation has increased considerably over the period 2001-2007 from only 1 validation in 2001 to approximately 455 validations in 2007. It is important to note here that before 2006 VAPRO-OVP undertook the validations while from 2006 onwards, a considerable part of the validations have been undertaken by a regional education centre offering vocational education (ROC) in partnership with VAPRO-OVP (thus including a VAPRO-OVP assessor) and applying the VAPRO-OVP method.

Number of companies and employees in the process industry involved in validation, 2001-2007

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Total
Nr. of employees involved in validation	1	8	131	218	229	402*	455**	**1444**

*Source: VAPRO-OVP, 2007; * of which approximately 300 validations have been undertaken by an ROC, in partnership with VAPRO-OVP; ** of which approximately 400 validations have been undertaken by an ROC in partnership with VAPRO-OVP.*

[1] Trade union
[2] Trade union
[3] In the Netherlands, the term EVC-(Erkenning van verworven competenties, acknowledgement of given competences) is used for all validation methods of non-formal and informal learning

Employers in the processing industry use validation as a performance appraisal tool and to motivate their workers to up-skill. Validation helps them to categorise available competences: many of their employees acquire skills on-the-job which are not officially recognised and thus "invisible".

Workers in the processing industry can typically work on four different levels of upper secondary vocational level (MBO-level 1; MBO level 2; MBO level 3; MBO level 4). Many workers do not up-skill to a higher skills level because they feel unable to perform at those levels; they lack confidence. However, through validation of their competences they realise they often already have sufficient knowledge and skills to be able to perform at higher competence levels. It is estimated that after validation of their competences, approximately 80%-90% of the participants continue with formal education to fill the identified missing gaps in their knowledge, necessary to up-skill to a higher level.

Since January 2007, employers who fund a validation procedure for their employees can receive a tax reduction (*wet vermindering afdracht)* of €300 for each employee undergoing validation. In the near future, employees who fund their own validation procedure can also receive a tax reduction (as long as the expense is above a threshold of €500)[1]. In addition, many Dutch validation procedures receive funding through ESF[2].

1.3 The VAPRO-OVP validation procedure[3]

The implementation of validation is carried out according to a standard VAPRO-OVP procedure which consists of several steps (see below for further details regarding the individual steps). The end result is always a validation-report with information on how the competences of the candidate relate to the necessary competences of a specific professional role. This is often combined with guidance in relation to further education or training to gain complete accreditation[4].

[1] Kenniscentrum EVC, *EVC procedures fiscaal aftrekbaar*. Retrieved November 2007: http://www.kenniscentrumevc.nl/evc_nl/fe948f7676cdc67fa067f7f4cdd19f41.php

[2] Interview VAPRO-OVP, 2007

[3] EVC-procedure gericht op het eindtermgerichte kwalificatiestructuur 2007, VAPRO-OVP. Retrieved October 2007: http://www.vapro-ovp.com/documenten/EVC%20eindtermengericht%202007.pdf

[4] VAPRO-OVP, 2007, *bijlage over EVC bij Jaarverslag Exameninstelling VAPRO schooljaar 2006/2007*

The following key actors are involved in the procedure and are almost always in direct employment of the VAPRO-OVP group (except for the internal assessor who can be employed by the employer)[1]:

- **Validation-procedure supervisor** The validation-procedure supervisor is involved throughout the validation-procedure of a certain participant. The supervisor is responsible for organising all the appointments which make up the procedure and ensuring that all the necessary steps are undertaken.

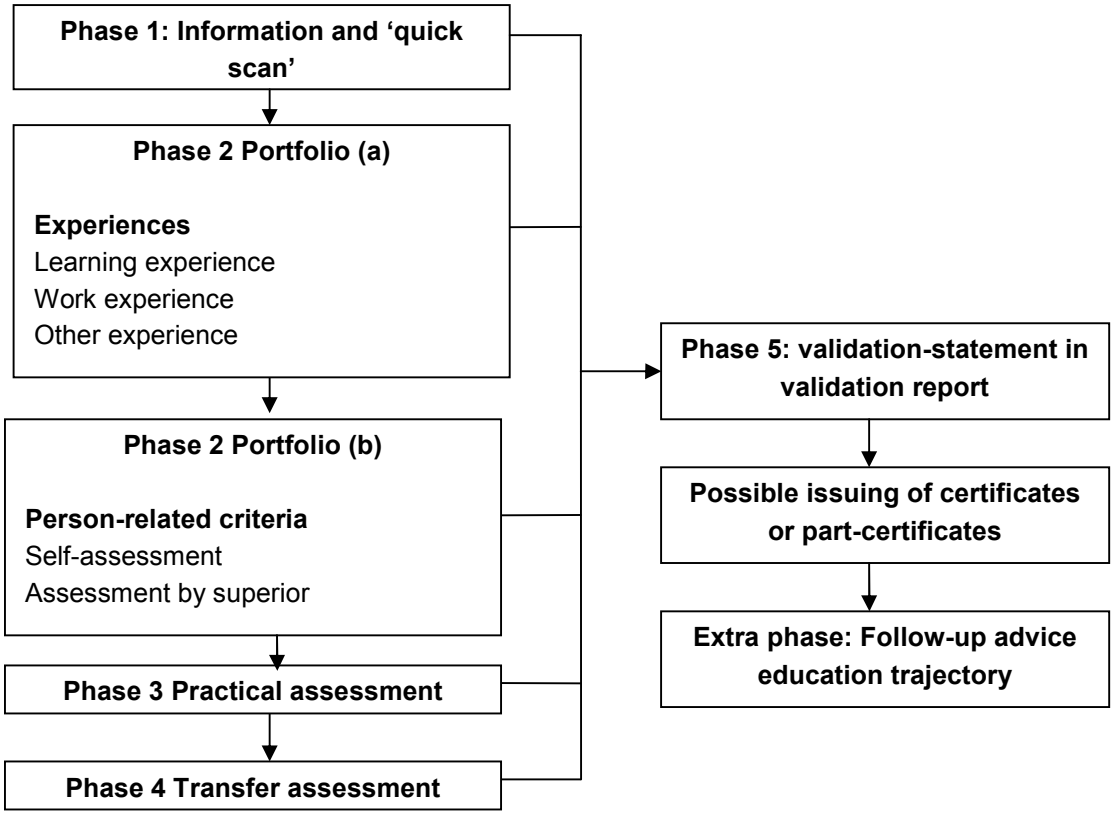
- **Portfolio supervisor** The validation-procedure supervisor and portfolio supervisor are often the same person. The portfolio supervisor supports the candidate with filling in the portfolio and judges the experiences of the candidate by comparing them with the professional competence based standard.

- **Internal assessor** The internal assessor carries out the internal (practical) assessment. In most cases, this assessment is carried out by two internal assessors. It is a requirement that one of these assessors is employed by the company in which the validation-procedure is undertaken and VAPRO-OVP certified. If this is not possible, then two assessors are from VAPRO-OVP and an internal employee is assigned to act as an internal specialist. In all cases, at least one of the assessors needs to be VAPRO-OVP certified. The certified assessor must follow an internal assessors training and the certificate is valid for three years, after which – according to a set procedure - certification can be repeated.

- **External assessor** The external assessor (of VAPRO-OVP) is, together with the internal assessor (of the company), responsible for the external (also referred to as transfer assessment) assessment.

[1] VAPRO-OVP, 2007, *Handboek EVC-procedure versie maart 2007*

The diagram below offers an overview of the procedure[1].



As a first step, the candidate is informed about the specifics of the validation-procedure and is asked to fill in a **quick scan** form to gain a broad understanding of her/his own skill levels. The candidate must fill in a few questions about his/her field of work. This quick scan is undertaken and assessed by the validation-procedure supervisor.

Secondly, when the quick scan shows that the candidate has the required knowledge and skills levels to undertake the validation-procedure, the candidate is asked to create a **portfolio**. In this portfolio, the candidate needs to collect evidence (certificates received, description of work experience, etc.) of his/her experiences;

- learning experience in regular education, training and other courses;
- work experience in current function and previous functions at the current employer and previous employers; and

[1] Based on VAPRO-OVP, 2007, *EVC-procedure gerich op het competentiegerichte kwalificatiedossier*

- other relevant experiences gained outside the workplace, through volunteer work or other.

Besides the collection of evidence, the candidate must also undertake a self-assessment by filling in a list with personal criteria. The supervisor of the candidate must also fill in this list. The candidate receives assistance from the portfolio supervisor and human resources of the involved company to complete this task. The portfolio supervisor makes a judgement of what existing experience the candidate possesses to get his/her competences validated and compares the self-assessment with the assessment made by the supervisor.

Third, after completion of the portfolio, the competences of the candidate are further assessed at the workplace by one or two internal assessors through a **practical assessment**. Typically, one assessor is a representative of the employer and one assessor is an accredited VAPRO-OVP assessor. The assessment typically lasts 1.5 hours and usually takes place in the morning at the workplace. The practical assessment is based on a work-place analysis. On the basis of this analysis, certain judgement criteria are established and these are translated into company-specific and workplace-specific questions which the candidate needs to answer. On the basis of the candidate's answers and observations of the candidate's practical skills by the assessors a comparison is made of the competences of the candidate with the judgement criteria.

Fourth, after the practical assessment, in the afternoon, a **transfer assessment** in the form of an interview is organised in the presence of an external assessor (of VAPRO-OVP) and an internal assessor (in most cases the representative of the employer). The goal of this interview is to see if the candidate has a sufficient knowledge of general theoretical concepts to ensure that his/her competences are transferable outside the company. The candidate must answer questions on how certain work procedures can be translated into other situations, outside his/her typical workplace.

In the last phase a complete assessment is undertaken by the portfolio supervisor and the assessors on the basis of the results of the two assessments and the portfolio. Their judgement is written up in a validation-report. This validation-report includes advice for the exam commission of the involved education institute (mostly a regional education centre offering vocational education-ROC) on whether to issue a part-certificate or a certificate. The exam commission of the relevant education institute (consisting typically of four members: an education manager, a secretary and two members of which one should be an external expert) then decides whether the advice is followed up with the issuing of nationally recognized education certificate or part-certificates. If the candidate does not agree with the decision, s(he) can request an appeal via the appeal commission.

In the last phase (which falls outside of the scope of the validation-procedure) the candidate and the validation-procedure supervisor can hold a **conversation**, sometimes in the presence of human resources and/or a representative of the education institute (regional education institute- ROC) to discuss their judgement and advice. On the basis of the advice, a suitable educational pathway can be decided on for the candidate to fill any knowledge gaps to acquire a full qualification. It was mentioned by one employer interviewed that he found this phase particularly valuable since it offers the ideal opportunity to draw up a personalised education plan for the employees involved[1].

1.4 Strengths and Weaknesses of the VAPRO-OVP validation procedure[2]

The VAPRO-OVP EVC procedure is set up so as to ensure a fair and objective view of the competences of the involved candidates. Objectivity is safeguarded in a number of ways. All candidates are evaluated according to the same procedure with set standards and different handbooks have been developed by VAPRO-OVP for all involved with a detailed explanation of the procedure and specific roles. In addition, every six weeks the assessors meet to discuss the validation procedure to overcome any problems and to improve the procedure and standards further[3].

Quality is safeguarded by the fact that at least one of the involved assessors needs to be VAPRO-OVP certified. The certified assessor must follow an internal assessors training and the certificate is valid for three years, after which – according to a set procedure - certification can be repeated. Newly certified assessors always shadow experienced certified assessors first, before they become active themselves[4].

During the assessment there is always one assessor from the candidate's employer company involved. This ensures that the EVC-procedure is relevant for the company and for the involved candidate. The company-specific assessor is involved in all validation procedures of employees from this specific company to assure uniformity and coherence. It also enhances communication between the assessors and the involved candidate.

Another strong point - emphasised in an interview with an employer - is the fact that the judgement criteria for the practical assessment are tailor-made for the involved company without losing national relevance. A national competence standard for each profession is translated by VAPRO-OVP into company-specific judgement criteria. This method maintains a national professional standard for comparison while at the same time assuring

[1] Interview Kemira, 2007
[2] Interview VAPRO-OVP, 2007, Interview Kemira, 2007
[3] Hobéon Certificering BV, November 2007, Beoordeling EVC-aanpak VAPRO-OVP BV
[4] ibid

that the involved candidate is not confronted with uncommon terminology or irrelevant knowledge or procedures for their specific situation.

1.5 Anticipated changes in VAPRO-OVP validation procedure[1]

With the wider introduction of competence-based education in the Dutch formal education system, the VAPRO-OVP validation procedure is currently being adapted and will become more competence-based. At the moment, the new competence-based procedure is being tested in four pilots and will soon be rolled out. With the introduction of this new procedure, practical expertise will be put more at the forefront than theoretical knowledge and candidates will gain recognition for certain competences, instead of receiving partial qualifications (still under negotiation). The validation-report will offer a summary of the candidate's competences (as well as the competences the candidate does not have). This summary can then be translated in a personal study plan, after which the candidate can obtain missing competences by following certain learning arrangements and through this obtain a qualification[2].

A positive effect of the introduction of competence-based learning and validation – according to an interviewed employer - is the fact that more attention is put on other competences, such as social skills, instead of only focusing on specific theory necessary to undertake certain tasks. However, an interviewee of VAPRO-OVP mentions that this might lead to too little attention on specific theoretical knowledge of processes, which form an essential part of the processing industry[3].

1.6 Outputs and outcomes / Impact

In general it is felt that the VAPRO-OVP validation procedure leads to increased motivation among employees to obtain a certain qualification level and to remain with their current employer. In addition, for employers the gain is a more thorough understanding of existing competences of their employees.

The gains can be categorised in the following way[4]:

- the employer gains a more thorough understanding of the skills level of employees;

[1] Interview VAPRO-OVP, 2007
[2] The formal education system exists out of 5 blocks, each consisting of 4 learning arrangements.
[3] Interview VAPRO-OVP, 2007; Interview Kamira, 2007
[4] VAPRO-OVP, 2007, *bijlage over EVC bij Jaarverslag Exameninstelling VAPRO schooljaar 2006/2007*

- the employer avoids offering training and education to employees, which could cover the specific expertise and skills (s)he already possesses;
- the employer can categorise which skills their employees do not possess with respect to, for example, new technologies and adjust their training and education offer.
- the employees can gain recognition of the skills they have and can get a formal qualification for a higher skills level;
- the employee becomes more motivated as they receive recognition of their skills and as a result typically feels more satisfied at work.

1.7 Sustainability and mainstreaming

Within the processing industry, the VAPRO-OVP validation procedure is the only validation procedure used and there are no demands from companies within the industry for an alternative procedure. One national standard procedure is preferred.

There are only very limited plans to integrate the VAPRO-OVP validation procedure with other validation procedures used in other sectors. The main idea is that the practical and transfer assessments are so sector-specific that integration is not desirable. However, certain other elements like the quick scan and the portfolio can be easily integrated into other procedures.

Recently, VAPRO-OVP has been successfully evaluated to become an official validation provider under Dutch law. They will soon be registered as a recognized Dutch validation provider and their validation provision will be published nationally[1]. In the future, further emphasis will be put on safeguarding this quality label For example, VAPRO-OVP is currently planning to start a research project to track candidates during their further education in order to track results and to safeguard and improve quality. In addition, attention will be paid to implementing and improving the new validation procedure based on competence based learning.

1.8 Brief conclusion

In conclusion, the VAPRO-OVP validation procedure seems to be well developed and offers an objective view of the candidate's skills level. The assessment has been thoroughly set up and its quality is safeguarded through the development of handbooks, accreditation of the assessors, the set up of a national professional standard to compare

[1] Hobéon Certificering BV, November 2007, Beoordeling EVC-aanpak VAPRO-OVP BV

existing competences of candidates with the national norm and the recently received national recognition as a validation provider under Dutch law.

The shift to a new procedure based on competence-based learning will put more focus on core competences instead of only focusing on theoretical expertise. This shift will offer new challenges in the future and it will be important to pilot and monitor the new processes to ensure that they are fit for purpose and of a similar quality and reliability of those currently in use. In particular, close attention must be paid to ensure the theoretical expertise of processing maintains its importance within the system.