

European Inventory

on validation of informal and non-formal learning



European inventory on validation of informal and non-formal learning BELGIUM

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The issue of validation of non-formal and informal learning is now well-established on the public policy agenda in Belgium, where initiatives have been developed in recent years in the context of a wider drive to improve access to Lifelong Learning. Responsibility for lifelong learning is shared between the Communities (Flemish, French-speaking and German-speaking), the Regions (Flemish Region or Flanders and Walloon Region or Wallonia) and the social partners. As such, the Belgian Federal government plays little role in the detailed development and implementation of policies in the field. The overview of developments set out in this report reflects this division of responsibility.

2.0 PUBLIC SECTOR

2.1 Public Sector Initiatives at Federal Level

As noted in the introduction, responsibility for education and training policy in Belgium lies with the Communities (based on language) at sub-national level. Where the recognition of skills impinges on employment policy, there is a shared competence with the Federal Government. Federal legislation may therefore intervene if the issue of validation affects the relation between the employee and the employer. For example, Federal Government must decide which categories of employees have the right to follow a validation procedure during working hours and the frequency with which this may occur. The Federal Government also makes decisions regarding access to regulated occupations and determines the conditions necessary to that end.¹

Since 1985, provided certain basic conditions are met, private-sector employees have had a right to paid training leave (*Congé-Education Payé/ Betaald Educatief Verlof*) of up to 180 hours per academic year to undertake work-related training. The upper limit for remuneration for such training leave is currently fixed at €1,960 in a given year². The training must be related to the individual's job and fulfil a number of other criteria set down by the relevant legislation. Public sector employees have a similar right to training leave, although subject to different rules and in their case referred to as *Congé Formation / Opleidingsverlof*.

A Federal law on the *bilan de compétences* (individual record of achievement) was passed in December 2001 and, following the approval of implementation legislation, officially entered into force in September 2002. This legislation grants every worker a right to a *bilan de compétences* and to be assessed to identify and validate skills gained outside the formal education system³.

At the end of 2006 a decree was introduced (the *Arrêté Royal du 10/11/2006*) which integrates the validation of competences into the right to paid training leave.

¹ Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of inormal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

² For year 2003-04 – See <http://www.meta.fgov.be/ph/phb/frhb00.htm>

³ compétences « buissonnières »

2.2 Public Sector Initiatives in the Flemish Community

2.2.1 Policy Context

The question of validation of non-formal and informal learning has become a significant and high priority policy issue in Flanders. In Flanders, as in the Netherlands, the concept is generally referred to under the heading of *Erkenning van Verworven Competenties* or EVC (Recognition of Acquired Competences or Recognition of Acquired Skills, RAS).¹ Policy in this field has been closely linked to the Flemish government's drive to develop an integrated approach to provision of lifelong learning, as set out in July 2000 in the Action Plan: *Een Leven Lang Leren in Goede Banen* (Lifelong Learning on the Right Track).

On the basis of the Action Plan, a working group was established to investigate the best means to implement EVC. This group included a team of academics², representatives of the Flemish Departments for Education, Employment, Culture and Economics, along with the Flemish Employment and Training Service (VDAB)³, the SME support service (VIZO)⁴, the Flemish social partners and the "Economic and Social" and "Education" Councils⁵. The outcome was an advisory paper⁶ containing a range of recommendations in order to operationalise the hitherto relatively vague concept of EVC. One of the recommendations that was immediately implemented, was to start with pilot projects that would build on prior experience with EVC.

In January 2003, the first five pilot projects were launched to test the principles set out in the advisory note. These pilot projects, addressing a range of different target groups, were co-ordinated by the "EVC project group" within the training policy organisation (DIVA⁷), which had recently been established.

The first round of five pilot projects in the field of EVC were carried out from January to December 2003. A second round of four projects started in December 2003 and finished in December 2004. The projects were:

First Round

- EVC in out of school childcare
- EVC in Teacher Training

¹ For consistency, we will continue to use the term EVC throughout this section to refer to initiatives in the sphere of validation

² Teams from the University of Antwerp and the HIVA as part of the VIONA Labour Market Research Partnership

³ *Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding* <http://www.vdab.be/vdab/>

⁴ *Vlaams Instituut voor het Zelfstandig Ondernemen*.

⁵ Respectively the *Sociaal-Economische Raad van Vlaanderen* (SERV) and the *Vlaamse Onderwijsraad* (VLOR)

⁶ *Ruim Baan voor Competenties, Advies voor een Model van (H)erkenning van Verworven Competenties in Vlaanderen: Beleidsconcept en aanzetten tot Operationalisering*

⁷ Dienst Informatie Vorming en Afstemming

- EVC for newcomers (immigrants). Measuring Competencies for Electronic Technicians and Maintenance Electricians
- Development, Testing and Evaluation of an EVC procedure for Tour Guides
- Skills for people with low qualification levels

Second Round

- Language skills in French and English (see below)
- EVC for Nursing Staff (4th Grade)
- EVC for “volunteers”
- EVC for the hospitality sector

In April 2004, the Flemish government recognised non-formal and informal learning via the Decree on 'Titles of Professional Competence', which later became known as experience certificates. Employees or job-seekers in the Flemish community can acquire an 'experience diploma' if they demonstrate that they have learned or acquired certain skills required to exercise an occupation.¹

The two current Ministers with particular responsibility for the development of EVC policy and practice are Frank Vandenbroucke (Vice-Prime Minister of the Flemish Government and Flemish Minister for Employment and for Education and Vocational Training) and Bert Anciaux (Flemish Minister for Culture, Youth, Sport and Brussels). They have signalled a clear commitment to develop further the recognition of informal and non-formal learning across the various policy areas and in consultation with all involved partners.²

Structured thinking about lifelong learning and skills acquired earlier or elsewhere thus began around the year 2000. An exploratory phase, looking at the general advantages and disadvantages of the recognition of acquired skills, was then followed by a phase of policy intentions and action plans. Today, the results of the subsequent phase of pilot projects and initiatives in different policy areas and at different levels are now taking shape. This section will now give a brief overview of the general approach to validation of non-formal and informal learning adopted in Dutch-speaking Belgium, followed by a more detailed examination of the methodologies in place within the different tranches of the public sector.

2.2.2 The Flemish Concept of Validation of Non Formal and Informal Learning

The Flemish model of EVC has two aspects, as set out in the EVC advisory note³:

¹ Refernet (2005-2006), Accumulating, transferring and validating learning, Belgium, published by Cedefop

² Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

³ *Ruim Baan voor Competenties 2002*

Recognition and transfer of competencies (summative function): the formal recognition of an individual's existing competencies, including those gained outside of formal education and training settings, is seen to have a significant "economic and social effect", in that it facilitates access to education and training and mobility within the labour market. This summative function would also allow competence gained in a formal setting, but outside the formal Belgian education system (abroad, for example), to be more easily "converted" into recognised Belgian qualifications.¹

Career and Personal Guidance (formative function): the ultimate aim of this formative aspect of EVC is a system of lifelong career path guidance², which is accessible for all citizens. This is distinct from firm-based Human Resources Management or training plans (which may have a direct link with an individual's terms and conditions of employment) and can be viewed as a personal "lifelong learning strategy".

In practical terms, EVC in Flanders comprises three main elements or stages³:

- Identification (Herkenning): the recognition of non-formal and informal learning will often start through career advice, through which an initial "portfolio" of an individual's competencies may be drawn up. This portfolio forms the basis for further advice and eventual recognition of competencies.
- Assessment (Beoordeling): assessment of competencies can result from referral from the identification phase or from an individual's own initiative. The assessment is based on professional standards set by the Social and Economic Council or SERV⁴ or fixed training standards and may entail written or practical tests, interviews and/or evidence of acquired skills (other certificates or examples of work etc.).
- Recognition (Erkenning): the formal recognition of competencies (potentially in the form of an experience certificate) can theoretically be undertaken by any organisation that satisfies official regulations.

2.2.3 EVC – objectives

The stated aim of EVC in the Flemish Community is to help individuals to achieve personal development and increased integration into the labour market and society in general. Experience certificates enable individuals to gain recognition for their professional

¹ There is an official institution in Flanders (as in other European countries) that recognises qualifications people have gained in other countries. EVC could potentially make the procedure easier and shorter.

² levensloopbaanbegeleiding

³ From *Oproep tot het indienen van voorstellen voor Pilotprojecten Erkenning Verworven Competenties 2003*, MinVG

⁴ *Sociaal-Economische Raad van Vlaanderen*

competences and for deprived groups in particular, the certificates help to re-establish confidence in the individual's own abilities and to enable them to progress their career.¹

The Flemish model of EVC is designed to be of equal relevance to a wide range of target groups, including not only those in mainstream employment and job seekers, but also the self employed, unqualified school leavers, immigrants and others. The guiding principles of the approach are non-discrimination, equal opportunities and societal integration.

Experience certificates contribute to increasing a higher level of employment and to easing tensions on the labour market. They can allow individuals to enhance their employability, to move more easily from inactivity into work and to stay employable for longer.

Experience certificates thus contribute to the attainment of a higher degree of employment and ease the tensions on the labour market. For employers, the certificates bring increased transparency and enable the matching of required skills with the talents of individuals. When new employees are being recruited, the experience certificates provide immediate confirmation of their professional competences. For existing employees, experience certificates may also prove to be useful for the optimum deployment and utilisation of talents within the company and for the development of a strategic training policy. The organisation of shorter training paths is cost-saving and it increases the chances of success. The experience certificate therefore further encourages companies to use a skills approach as a point of departure for their human resources policy.²

2.2.4 EVC – Methodology in detail

The decree of 30 April 2004 regarding the acquisition of a title of professional competence outlined an initial framework with regard to procedures and responsibilities. The Flemish government was attributed key decision-making responsibilities, with support from the SERV and the Education Council (VLOR). For example, the SERV delivers annual advice to the Flemish government regarding the selection of experience certificates, taking into account the following criteria:

- bottleneck occupations
- the presence of an occupational profile
- pilot experience with the assessment of acquired skills
- the need for a balanced mix of sectors and levels of skills³
- the extent of support by the sectoral partners.¹

¹ Education Department, Ministry of the Flemish Community (2005), Implementing the 'Education and Training 2010' work programme, National report 2006 of the Flemish Community (Belgium)

² Vandenbroucke, 2004, in Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

³ Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

The 'experience certificate' or 'title of professional competence' is an official recognised certificate issued by the Flemish government. The certificate confirms that an individual has acquired specific professional skills. For every experience certificate, specific standards are drawn up for each occupation by SERV. These occupation standards consist of the professional competence profiles that describe what may be expected of a practitioner of a given profession. Currently, there are procedures in place for the delivery of experience certificates for bus drivers, coach drivers, outside-school-hours child care workers, call centre operators, industrial painters and tower crane operators, although this list is constantly being updated with new occupations. Since early 2007, there are now also test centres for barbers and hairdressers, hairstylist parlour managers, removals packers and removals carriers. In 2006, the first two experience certificates were issued to two call centre operators.²

In order to obtain an experience certificate, an individual must approach an accredited assessment authority (test centre). All public and private training providers can apply for accreditation as an assessment authority. Accredited assessment agencies have the following mission:

- to create an assessment methodology and develop one or more assessment tools, based on the nationally determined standard and directives for assessment;
- to offer guidance, on request, in the listing of skills and the compilation of a talents passport;
- to assess the applicant's acquired skills through analysis of the talents passport, a practical test and (if desired) a theoretical test;
- to give feedback on the applicant's assessment result and, if necessary, formulate advice for a course of training or additional work experience;
- to formulate and send advice for the conferment of a title by the recognition agency. This advice contains a report on the assessment.

To guarantee fair treatment of individuals and transparent assessment, the assessment authorities must comply with nationally determined standards and assessment directives.

Recognition agencies have the following responsibilities:

- to determine a format for the experience certificates
- to confer and award the experience certificates on the basis of the advice from the accredited assessment agency.

¹ Education Department, Ministry of the Flemish Community (2005), Implementing the 'Education and Training 2010' work programme, National report 2006 of the Flemish Community (Belgium)

² Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

- data management - identification data assessment results;
- the low-threshold installation and management of a databank with formats for the talents passport, titles, standards, guidelines etc
- awareness-raising among potential applicants
- awareness-raising among interested parties such as employers, education establishments and providers of training courses;
- monitoring.

The recognition agency must be a government authority.

2.2.5 Formal Education and Training – Exemptions

Two decrees have been introduced in the Flemish Community, so that individuals who have acquired competences at work or elsewhere may be granted exemption from at least parts of formal education and training. By taking special examinations, adults can gain recognition for individual learning at work or elsewhere to obtain the same qualification as those having followed traditional pathways. This applies to adult education and higher education. Next to these decrees, there is also an existing EVC-procedure for obtaining a diploma secondary education: the system of the central examination commission (*Centrale Examencommissie*) of the Flemish Community.¹

2.2.6 EVC in Adult Education

In 1999, a decree was introduced to allow a reduction of study periods to be granted for adult education courses, if relevant work experience was proven. More recently, the Flemish Government has approved a new decree relating to adult education. This decree places considerable emphasis on the validation of skills, both in terms of dispensations and of the certification of skills acquired elsewhere.

The decree outlines a clear mission in adult education with regards the assessment and certification of competences acquired elsewhere. Distinction is made between the following actions:

- The measuring and testing of skills acquired earlier (SAE) as a function of the dispensations applied by the centres. The student has the right to minimise the length of a course of studies as much as possible and should therefore be released from those components of the course for which his or her skills are already sufficiently established.
- The assessment of professional skills. The decree of 21 April 2004 relating to the Title of Professional Competence or experience certificate provides that Adult Education Centres may act as assessment bodies. This task is included in the new decree on

¹ Information provided by Mr Wilfried Boomgaert, Ministry of Education and Training, Flemish Community of Belgium

adult education, subject to the centres' adherence to the provisions of the abovementioned decree and the implementing order on that decree of 23 April 2004.

- The certification of skills acquired via distance learning courses. The centres could have the educational powers for organising the relevant training evaluations and awarding certificates.
- The possibility of developing over the longer term a more standardized certification of SAE for non-vocationally-oriented qualifications, for instance in connection with languages.

The validation of skills acquired elsewhere in the context of dispensations from course components is the responsibility of the director of a centre. In the interests of the students and the centres, efforts must be made to ensure as much uniformity as possible between the measuring of skills acquired elsewhere and the granting of dispensations. Provision has therefore been made at regional level for closer cooperation and alignment (procedures, instruments, assessment).¹

2.2.7 Validation in Higher Education

The 2004 decree on flexible learning created a legal framework for the validation of prior learning and/or professional experience for:

- Access to higher education programmes
- Decreasing study duration.

The decree meant that the pursuit of studies was no longer determined on the basis of passing examinations but on the acquisition of proofs of credit for the separate course components.

One of the results of the earlier Decree on the structure of higher education (2003) was the official recognition of cooperation between a university and one or more '*hogescholen*', which is known as 'association'. The aim of these associations is to become cooperating entities on education and research, and the development of fine arts, as well as to harmonise fields of study and create bridges between bachelor's and master's studies.

Following the 2004 decree on flexible learning, each of the above 'associations' was obliged to install an agency for the validation of prior learning. The methodology applied for the validation of prior learning was as follows:

- Applicants present a portfolio which details their prior learning experience

¹ Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders In (Belgium)

- The association's 'validation agency' assesses the application, taking into account the learning outcomes of the programme applied for
- A Proof of Competence (POC) certificate is issued

A study conducted with two higher education associations (association KULeuven and association UGent)¹ regarding their experience in implementing EVC found that in general, the number of EVC student applications remained restricted. The study attributed this to the fact that students were unfamiliar with EVC, that procedure, information and publicity about EVC was not yet widely distributed within the organisations and that a number of questions remained unsolved about the cost and benefits of the EVC procedure. The study noted that most students that had undertaken the EVC procedure reported positive experiences but some were disillusioned because of the heavy workload involved.

The law determines that EVC assessors in higher education must be evaluation experts and are not permitted to combine the assessment activity with the actual guidance and support of the applicant. Students are entitled to request support during their EVC application and for feedback at the end of the procedure. Basic information is available from the associations' websites and also on the website of the Flemish department of Education. In the case of the two associations in the above study (KULeuven and UGent) they can also refer to the guides on EVC prepared by the institutions, or the relevant information incorporated into the institutions' general study guides. Students also have access to competence maps (where available) for the curriculum they pursue. A general brochure on EVC is currently being prepared by the Department of Education.

In terms of costs, this is determined at basic level by the legislation. Institutions can ask for a basic fee to cover administrative costs and for an additional amount which is related to the number of competences to be identified during the assessment phase.

The challenge for the assessment procedures in higher education is in the first place a harmonisation of the different methods and standards used by the associations. At the present moment they vary according to the associations - the aforementioned study notes that in practice, there are large inter-institutional differences between, but also within institutions. This means that students eligible for a proficiency certificate for acquired skills and for a reduction of study duration will have the impression that they can 'shop around' between the various associations.²

¹ de Craene, B., An Exploratory Study of the Formal Recognition of Prior Learning Experiences in the Context of Flemish Higher Education, Sense Publishers

² Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

In 2006, the Decree on the establishment of measures for restructuring and flexibility in higher education simplified and improved the procedures for recognition of prior learning. The outcomes (access to higher education programmes, shortening of study duration) and the basic methodology outlined above remain the same. The system of appeals against the decisions of the validation agency has also been improved.

However, there remain several issues to be addressed. We have already noted that there are significant differences in the procedures in place which may lead to students 'shopping around'. A critical issue for many institutions is that not all curricula have been fully developed in terms of competences. For the associations, the time investment of staff is high and no additional resources have been made available by the Department of Education so the extra work has to be taken up by existing staff. It is felt that EVC is promoted on the one hand but not financially supported on the other – which affects its acceptance at institutional level.¹

Each association is responsible for quality assurance regarding EVC with respect to the following criteria: transparency, reliability and regularity of the procedures and methodology adopted.² The Flemish government has responsibility for the five-yearly evaluation of how the associations and institutions attend to the quality assurance of their EVC procedures and their dispensation procedures.³

2.3 Public Sector Initiatives in the French Community

2.3.1 Policy context

On July 24 2003, a cooperation agreement on the validation of competences in the field of continuing vocational training was concluded between the different authorities of the French-speaking part of Belgium (*la Communauté française, la Région wallonne and la Commission communautaire française*). The cooperation agreement was formalised through three decrees adopted by the authorities concerned at the end of 2003 and the beginning of 2004.

In July 2005, the combined authorities of the French-speaking community of Belgium published a second Strategic Plan for Research and Training, to develop knowledge and

¹ de Craene, B., An Exploratory Study of the Formal Recognition of Prior Learning Experiences in the Context of Flemish Higher Education, Sense Publishers

² *ibid*

³ Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

know-how in Wallonia.¹ The plan acknowledges the progress made by the different actors involved (the validation consortium and the CCPQ – see below) but stresses that more needs to be done.

There is a specific objective in the plan "to accelerate the process of development of the validation of competences", where progress to date was recognised but deemed insufficient. These specific objectives with respect to validation were set out:

- to establish new validation centres in Wallonia and Brussels;
- to disseminate to potential validation centres more precise information on the criteria they must meet for approval;
- to reorganise the production cycle for the validation reference frameworks;
- to take into account the reference frameworks set out by the CCPQ;
- to organise a dissemination campaign with the aim of increasing the awareness of validation among potential beneficiaries.

The following sections outline the objectives of the validation of competences, the methodology in place to implement validation actions and the specific frameworks with respect to formal and higher education. These should permit an overview of the extent to which the plan's objectives are being addressed.

2.3.2 Validation of Competences - Objectives

The main objective of the legislation on *validation des compétences* is to enable citizens over the age of 18 to gain recognition for the competences they have acquired through professional experience and training and through other life experiences. Official recognition of individuals' skills is seen as beneficial in terms of their professional identity and should guarantee access to continuing education, enable the individual to manage their career path and allow them to validate their abilities within the labour market.

In line with the *Note d'orientation stratégique* (see below), priority is currently given to the following target groups:

- Workers, in or out of employment (with priority given to the unemployed)
- Individuals with skills which are not recognised
- Individuals without an upper secondary education diploma (CESS)

¹ Plan stratégique transversal 2 Recherche et formation – Développer les connaissances et les savoir-faire en Wallonie. Available at: <http://www.validationdescompetences.be/desktopdefault.aspx?tabID=89>

Target groups are also selected in line with the current employment policies and measures in place, in order to ensure that the *Titres de compétence* can help to support these (e.g. policies to help older workers).¹

2.3.3 Validation of Competences - Methodology

A consortium of the five main public sector providers of continuing vocational training manages the implementation of the legislation on validation of competences. These are:

- *Enseignement de Promotion Sociale, EPS* (Adult Education Provider in the 'communauté française' – i.e. Wallonia and Brussels-Capital Regions);
- *The Institut de Formation des Petites et Moyennes Entreprises, IFAPME* (Training Agency for the Self Employed and SMEs in the Walloon Region);
- *FOREm* (the Walloon Professional Training Service);
- *Bruxelles Formation* (Public sector training agency in the Brussels-Capital region)and;
- *Service de Formation des petites et moyennes entreprises, SFPME*, (Training Service for Small and Medium-Sized enterprises in Brussels).

The Consortium oversees a network of 22 centres² which carry out the recognition and validation of competencies. These centres are run by one of the 5 public sector providers, or by a partnership involving one of the 5 providers.

The validation centres carry out certification by delivering *titres de compétences* to adults who can prove that they meet the standards for a certain occupation. These *titres de compétences* are based on testing and in the future a competence portfolio will also be used. These certificates are not on their own, equivalent to standard diplomas, but are designed to facilitate access to further training courses. The *titres de compétences* can also be accumulated to obtain a qualification, on the condition of passing an integrated test (*épreuve intégrée*) organised by the *Enseignement de Promotion Sociale*.

Indeed, policy developments on the validation of skills therefore follow on from earlier restructuring in the adult education sector. Since the adoption of a new legal framework in 1991³, adult or continuing education (*Enseignement de Promotion sociale*) in the French Community has been progressively restructured to create a more coherent, modular structure with transferable credit units and more flexible timetables. For each module or "training unit/ *unité de formation*", teaching and learning outcomes have been established, together with prerequisite levels of knowledge or experience for individuals wishing to

¹ Consortium de Validation des Compétences, 2007, Dispositif de la validation des compétences professionnelles, Présentation brève, June 2007

² Consortium de Validation des Compétences, 2007, Dispositif de la validation des compétences professionnelles, Présentation brève, June 2007

³ The Decree of 16 April 1991

undertake the course in question.¹ In 2005, the *Enseignement de Promotion sociale* modified its *reglementation* to automatically recognise the *titres de competences*.

Each year, a *Note d'orientation strategique* is adopted on 15 October via the *Commission consultative et d'agrément* by the social partners and the public employment services. This *Note* gives strategic direction to the measures in place to serve the decrees on *validation* and specifies for which professions *titres de competences* should be made available. The number of qualifications available through *validation* therefore increases year by year.

For each profession, a *Commission de Référentiels* has been established which brings together the social partners for the sector with education and training providers. Within a timeframe of four to six months these *Commissions* are expected meet at least six times in order to determine competence and validation reference frameworks for the professions within the relevant sectors:

- A competence reference framework (*référentiel de compétence*) defines the profession, a list of the key activities which are carried out and the skills required within the profession.
- Within the competence reference framework, the profession is then subdivided into 'competency units' (*unités de compétences*). The number of competency units associated with a profession vary between two and five, each of them corresponding to a *titre de compétences*.
- For each one of these competency units, a validation reference framework (*référentiel de validation*) must be defined. The validation reference framework specifies the evaluation criteria and the professional activity which can be observed to determine whether the individual possesses the competences required to be granted the *titre de compétence*.

Competency units for each profession are thus recognised through a certificate (*titre de compétences*) which is obtained via an examination (a professional observation). These certificates confirm the individual's ability to carry out a certain element of a profession and are legal documents, recognised by the three governments of the French Community. However, they do not bring the same legal rights as a certificate awarded through formal qualification.²

Once the validation reference frameworks have been finalised with complete consensus and approved by the Governments, the validation centres begin to deliver the corresponding certificates (*titres de competences*). However, only centres with an

¹ <http://www.enseignement.be/citoyens/annuaires/promsoc/propos.asp>

² Rapport conjoint 2008 sur la mise en oeuvre du programme "Education et Formation 2010", Belgique francophone

appropriate agreement are allowed to organise validation testing. Centres have to develop a quality system similar to the ISO 9001-2000 certification to become validation centre. This agreement is awarded by the Governments.

By June 2007, validation was possible through the 22 official Validation Centres for 23 professions.

2.3.4 Formal education and training - exemptions

The system of boards of examiners in the French Community (*Jury de la Communauté française*), which are operated by the Ministry of the French Community provides alternative examinations for those who have followed other "learning routes" than formal schooling. To prepare for these examinations, candidates have access to necessary facilities in public or private schools and through arrangements for distance learning. Executive orders (arrêtés de l'Exécutif) determine the rules and regulations governing the organisation and functioning of the assessment boards. In secondary education, a number of qualifications may be obtained through this route.¹

2.3.5 Validation in Higher Education

In terms of access to higher education, establishments organise admittance exams for persons who do not have a secondary education qualification. In certain cases, it is possible for a person who does not have a first cycle diploma to access the second cycle (masters) via recognition of the knowledge and skills they have acquired through professional or personal experience.²

The 2005 Strategic Plan for Research and Training states that a valorisation process should to encourage those adults (job-seekers and those in employment) who wish to enter higher education to do so via the valorisation of their professional experience, other experience and training. Aside from the personal benefits to the individual, it is intended that this should facilitate job-search and promote active citizenship among those adults who resume higher education study.³

The plan sets out the following objectives for the sphere of higher education:

- to encourage higher education institutions to accept adults wishing to resume higher studies. This requires partnerships to be set up between higher education institutions and the FOREm;

¹ Refernet (2005-2006), Accumulating, transferring and validating learning, Belgium, published by Cedefop

² Towards the European higher education area, Bologna process, National Reports 2004-2005, Belgium, French Community. Available at: http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/EN/national_impl/05NAT_REP.HTM

³ Plan stratégique transversal 2 Recherche et formation – Développer les connaissances et les savoir-faire en Wallonie. Available at: <http://www.validationdescompetences.be/desktopdefault.aspx?tabID=89>

- to establish a framework for the validation of competences as a method of gaining a place at a higher education institution.

The use of validation as a method of applying to higher education (*universités* and *hautes écoles*) was to be operationalised during 2007. In 2006, the Lifelong Learning Commission of the *Conseil Universitaire de la Communauté française, CIUF* (University Council of the French Community) received a grant from the French Community to "support the development of good practice in supporting adults to resume studies and the structuring of activities for the validation of experience in the *Académies*". This grant was distributed to the three university *Académies*, each of which set in place a pilot project for VAE.¹

¹ Rapport sur le suivi du Processus "Education et Formation 2010", Belgique Francophone

3.0 PRIVATE SECTOR

3.1 Role of the Social Partners

Social partners, at both cross-sectoral and sectoral level, were involved, in collaboration with the public actors, in the definition of systems of references within the framework of the validation of competencies.¹ The sectors have been encouraged to validate training through sectoral certification systems or "vocational training passports".²

In the Flemish community, the involvement of the social partners in drawing up the priorities and the growth path for the experience certificates was established in the Flemish employment agreement for 2005-2006.³

The work of vzw VOKANS in Flanders is a good example of how social partners have become involved in the implementation of VAE actions, as outlined below.

EVC activities run by VOKANS

vzw VOKANS (Vormings- en opleidingskansen' - Vocational Training and Education Opportunities), was set up in 1990. The trade unions ACV and ACW form the basis of this non-profit organization.

vzw VOKANS has been recognized and subsidised for some considerable time now as a vocational training and employment organization; it pursues the objective of increasing and sustaining employment opportunities for job-seekers and employees.

VOKANS is running or has already conducted a number of projects on the recognition of acquired skills. The 'competentiespiegel' ('skills mirror') is directed towards recognition of various forms of acquired knowledge, abilities and attitudes from a non-formal framework, specifically for low-skilled women with little in the way of work experience of relevance to the labour market. These women will consequently be better screened and more efficiently steered towards labour-market-oriented training courses and thence towards regular employment. The 'E=MC2'-project pursues the objective of offering the unemployed or other groups more concrete prospects of employability. The e-learning method proposed by the project is based on the EVC perspective. Through the application of the existing EVC methods, attempts are being made to achieve two development goals: first, the development of the client and, second, developing supply among organisations on the labour market. The project is designed to face the challenge of motivation and to give form to instrumentation via the e-learning of skills (e-learning van competenties - eVC).⁴

¹ Refernet (2005-2006), Accumulating, transferring and validating learning, Belgium, published by Cedefop

² Framework of Actions for the Lifelong Development of Competencies and Qualifications, Third follow-up report 2005

³ Education Department, Ministry of the Flemish Community (2005), Implementing the 'Education and Training 2010' work programme, National report 2006 of the Flemish Community (Belgium)

⁴ Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

3.2 Professional Profiles at Federal level

A number of initiatives in the field of professional skill profiling and accreditation have been undertaken in Belgium. Although these initiatives have been led by public sector organisations, they have involved close co-operation with representatives of the private sector and social partners.

At the Federal level, accreditation of individuals was overseen by Belcert, the body responsible for accrediting organisations that certify products, quality systems and individuals, until 2006. Belcert used ISO/IEC 17024 (former EN 45013) on certifying individuals as a reference and certification organisations were accredited in a number of sectors, including construction and catering. A Royal Decree of January 31, 2006, created BELAC¹ as the sole Belgian body for the accreditation of conformity assessment bodies and came into force on August 1, 2006. BELAC therefore took over all activities previously carried out by Belcert.

3.3 Qualification and Training Profiles at Community level

The concept of qualification and training profiles (*profils de formation*) originated in the French Community decrees of 27 October 1994 and 7 April 2005 on cooperation in secondary education. This legislation led to the establishment of the *Commission Communautaire des Professions et Qualifications*, CCPQ (Community Commission for Professions and Qualifications) which brings together public and private partners from the spheres of education, business, trade unions and representatives of other training providers. The CCPQ has two key aims:

- to verify the relevance of training provision to the current and future needs of business and where necessary, to instigate necessary amendments;
- to redefine training provision and place more emphasis on the skills which must be acquired, rather than the volume of content which is delivered.

In order to achieve these aims, the CCPQ set up nine *Commissions consultatives*, CC (Consultative Commissions) which prepare the profiles – there is one commission for each of the nine training sectors. The Commissions are composed of groups of representatives from the same range of organisations as the CCPQ and are led by business representatives.

¹ <http://belac.fgov.be/>

3.4 Activities within the Private Sector

The role of skills or competencies in Human Resources Management has become a significant issue in many private sector organisations in Belgium. Research¹ has shown that many companies have undertaken analysis of the activities, roles and job and person specifications within their businesses, leading to the establishment of standards or *référentiels* related to specific jobs. These developments are generally used within businesses to feed into remuneration decisions (linking pay to skills), mobility within the firm and recruitment policies and requirements.

However, the range of models and the way they are implemented remains very varied and where validation procedures exist, these are generally not recognised outside the company or sector. In general, standards, which may or may not be validated in a formal manner, tend to be framed on the basis of a particular job description, rather than skills and personal development of the individual. This means that much firm-based validation of skills does not lead to “qualifications” that are recognised in the wider labour market. Indeed, one of the main objectives of the 2001 law on validation of skills was to provide a transparent framework for validation leading to commonly recognised standards and “transferable” skills.

Although, within the scope of this overview, it is not possible to examine individual private sector activities in the field of training and recognition of competencies in great detail, the following case study from one of Belgium’s largest manufacturing companies is included for illustrative purposes.

3.5 Training and Skills Management in Cockerill Sambre

Cockerill Sambre is a Wallonia-based steel making business, which, since 2002, has been part of the Arcelor Group, the world’s biggest steel maker. Group-wide restructuring means that Cockerill’s blast-furnace activities will end in 2009 and the workforce will be cut by 25%. As part of the restructuring plan, the company’s training department teamed up with researchers from the University of Liège (CRIFA²) to develop a methodology for transferring the knowledge and skills of workers leaving on early retirement to other workers within the firm. This project involved:

- identification of skills profiles and key individuals to act as “trainers”
- development of training techniques and tools

¹ See for example: *La validation des compétences buissonnières, quels enjeux pour les entreprises?* - CRIFA

² Centre de Recherche sur l'Instrumentation, la Formation et l'Apprentissage

- validation of these tools and desired outcomes within the firm (training centre and Human Resources department)
- implementation of training plan.

4.0 THE THIRD SECTOR

In Flanders, SoCiuS, the support service for social and cultural adult education, is an autonomous body with the objective of strengthening the social and cultural sector. One of its stated aims is to ensure that social and cultural organisations play an important role in lifelong learning and, to this end it is a partner in the adult learning co-ordination organisation DIVA.

In 2005, a working group was set up, led by SoCiuS and FOV (Federation of Organisations active in the popular (non-formal) adult education scene), with the task of developing a vision around EVC in socio-cultural work.

In the same year, a vision text on EVC was developed by the socio-cultural sector, including the policy areas Youth (represented by Steunpunt Jeugd) and Sport (represented by the VSF). In this vision, the term 'recognition' or 'assessment' is taken to mean *“the assessment of the listed skills that are supported by documentary evidence. Such assessment happens on the basis of (a) reference framework(s), also known as (a) standard(s). Such assessment may be done by the individual himself or herself, by means of a self-evaluation. The latter is especially the case when EVC has a formative function¹.*

Currently, organisations in socio-cultural adult education can, at their own discretion, issue a certificate to their members for a completed course of training (these certificates can be downloaded from the SoCiuS website). Within youth work, attestations for vocational training are delivered by the Flemish government (the Youth Department). The recognition and assessment of skills in the Sports sector is the remit of the sports agency BLOSO (Intern Verzelfstandigd Agentschap met rechtspersoonlijkheid).²

At present responsibility for whether and how such 'assessment' is conducted lies with the providers of the training course themselves, within both socio-cultural adult education and youth work. To give a clearer structure to EVC in socio-cultural education the vision text proposes making use of two sorts of evidence: the learning certificate and the skills certificate.

The **learning certificate** *“is a piece of documentary evidence of experience in education and vocational training. It is a form that is issued by the entity organizing the activity after*

¹ By 'formative function' the socio-cultural sector understands the advantages (social integration, social involvement, active citizenship) and personal development of RAS. This is distinguished from the summative function, which refers more to the economic and educational advantages of RAS.

² Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

completion of a training, study day, course..." It is therefore a proof of participation by the person in question. The learning certificate also states the educational objectives of the training activity. To increase the recognition of such a certificate SoCiuS provides a common format for organisations in this sector. There are currently no strict conditions to be satisfied for issuing learning certificates.

A **skills certificate** shows that a coherent whole of skills has in fact been acquired. In order to obtain a skills certificate an assessment must therefore be conducted. The awarding body guarantees that the skills are in fact present and controls the quality of the process and the applied standards. The same format is used for a skills certificate as for the learning certificate, supplemented with a description of the skills and the level at which they were acquired.

A further suggestion is the introduction of a function certificate. A **function certificate** *"shows that a particular function as volunteer was performed during a certain period"*. Besides the recognition of acquired skills, this certificate is therefore also a form of appraisal of the applied effort. Function certificates not only recognise the visible, describable functions but also the less obvious. No function certificates have yet been issued but socio-cultural education intends to develop this instrument in the near future.¹

The abovementioned certificates may be included in a 'learning book' (see below) which can be used as a portfolio to group together experience from informal and non-formal learning environments.

An overview of the use of the learning and skills certificates was published in October 2005 and showed that learning certificates were issued for 429 (11%) of 3,800 registered activities. 33 of those 429 activities were organized by non-accredited organizations.²

A small survey was conducted in the same year among movements, institutions and associations in socio-cultural education. A total of 10 movements, 10 institutions and 9 associations were questioned about the knowledge and use of learning certificates and skills certificates.

¹ SoCiuS 2006a, in Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

² Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

Table 4.1 Knowledge and use of learning certificates and skills certificates

	Movements (N=10)	Institutions (N=10)	Associations (N=10)	TOTAL (N=29)
Knowledge of learning certificate	4	9	1	14
Knowledge of skills certificate	2	7	1	10
Use of learning certificate	1	6	0	7
Use of skills certificate	0	1	0	1

The data shows that approximately half of the respondent organisations knew of the learning certificate, but only a limited number of organizations actually used the learning certificate. Knowledge and use of learning certificates was highest among the institutions. This is because persons following a training course in an institution can use training cheques (if training cheques are used then you must receive a learning certificate on completion of the course). Furthermore, institutions offer more courses in non-formal contexts than movements and associations, where the learning context is of a more informal nature.

The learning certificate is not used more widely for a number of reasons, including the associated administrative burden and the fact that the formulation of learning objectives is not clear.

At present there are no strict conditions to be satisfied for issuing learning certificates. In the same survey the organisations were asked to say which conditions they would attach to the learning certificate. The answers were varied, but they do give a picture of the vision of conditions and quality assurance for the learning certificate. The most frequently mentioned conditions concerned the duration of training, the demand of the participants themselves and the use of training cheques.¹

A further opportunity in the Flemish community with a view to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in socio-cultural work may be found in the development of the *leerboekje* or learning track record. The *leerboekje* is a useful instrument for the recognition and 'stock-taking' of skills in the life-wide sphere. It is a type of portfolio in which knowledge, talent, ability and skills acquired in a non-formal or informal learning environment in one or another (socio-) cultural sectors are recorded. In his policy letter *Cultuur 2006-2007* Minister Anciaux announced that, in his opinion, the *leerboekje* is one

¹ SoCiuS 2006a, in Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

of the priorities of the ministerial committee Education, Vocational and Employment. The coordination and implementation of the detail of the project is managed by SoCiuS.¹

SoCiuS emphasises that there are fundamental differences with regards the recognition of skills in socio-cultural adult education, compared with the policy areas Education and Work. In socio-cultural adult education, the actors involved prefer to develop their own instruments and procedures and for vocational training providers to choose the way in which they will or will not develop their training and whether they wish to recognise the acquired skills. This freedom is seen as crucial. The main concern of socio-cultural adult education is that the recognition of acquired skills involving training work is excessively geared towards the award of diplomas. This would mean that training courses would need to be highly structured and formalised, with clear objectives and assessment. Stakeholders from socio-cultural education fear that the emphasis is therefore placed on the acquisition of diplomas, rather than the acquisition of skills. The stakeholders therefore prefer to focus on lifewide learning and the development of social, cultural and communications skills.²

Moreover, a pilot project for EVC within voluntary work showed that regarding tools, volunteers are less willing to use 'hard' assessment tests but prefer self-evaluation tools, such as a personal portfolio.³

An example of an EVC project in the youth sector is given below.

Competence Sticks

In the Flemish Community, the youth service Jeugd en Stad (JES) used a grant from the European Social Fund (Objective 3, focal point 4) to develop a project called "C sticks" ("competence sticks"). C Sticks are digital portfolios which help young people to identify, access and develop the key competences they have learned through volunteering and to help them to understand how to use these competences in the labour market.

The target groups for the project were young people aged 18-25, volunteers in urban district youth work, young job-seekers and JES workers.

40 beneficiaries took part in the pilot project and developed their own digital portfolio on a usb drive. This enabled them to collect information about themselves and their skills through different media (pictures,

¹ http://www.socius.be/?action=artikel_detail&artikel=303

² Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

³ Gillebeert and Leroy, 2005, in Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

videos, images) and to updated their portfolio very easily. A second phase of the project was planned, involving more people and an older target group.¹

Beyond socio-cultural adult education and youth work, the recognition of informal learning and non-formal learning in cultural sectors of the Flemish community of Belgium, such as the amateur arts and libraries, is still in the planning phase.²

¹ Youth Action for Peace, 2007, YAP Mag, Vol. 3 June 2007, available at http://www.yap.org/docs/yapmag!_june2007.pdf and Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

² Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

The importance of recognizing skills gained through non-formal and informal learning is well established in Belgium and formal legal frameworks have been put in place in both the French and Dutch speaking parts of the country. The concept of validation adopted in both communities relates mainly to vocational skills (gained through informal learning) although it does allow for the recognition of skills gained outside work in, for example, voluntary activities. The scope of validation and recognition of non-formal and informal skills is not currently as broad as that set in place by the most recent French legislation on the *Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience*, in so far as it will not cover such a wide range of qualifications or form the basis for the award of full diplomas of qualifications.

As noted, the systems in both the French and Flemish Community are still being developed and implemented. As such, it will be important to monitor progress. For example, in Flanders, EVC procedures currently in use vary across the organisations involved and there are no procedures in place to monitor and coordinate EVC initiatives. Stakeholders consider supervision and quality control to be important aspects for the future development of EVC and recommend that an institutional framework for the recognition of acquired skills should be set in place.¹

The implementation of EVC/VAE procedures will need to be accompanied by strong actions in terms of raising awareness and support among the general public and the stakeholders involved. In the Flemish Community, for example, it is essential to overcome fears that developments in the recognition of skills will be to the detriment of educational standards and will encourage an increase of unqualified school-leavers.

However, across the country, the benefits of EVC/VAE are clearly recognised. Measures in place to validate competencies acquired outside of the school system play a major role in professional and geographical mobility. It is also recognised that they bring social advantages (social integration, social commitment, active citizenship) and personal development.² This recognition of the benefits of the validation of non-formal and informal learning represents an important step towards the integration of methodologies in practice, and their take-up by the public.

¹ Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

² *ibid*