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

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1.0 VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN BELGIUM

By Simon Roy (ECOTEC Research and Consulting)

1.1 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. As with mainstream education, non-formal and informal learning falls under the responsibility of the French, Flemish and German-speaking Communities in Belgium. 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.

1.2 Existing Initiatives: Public sector

1.2.1 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. However, as responsibility for social security and, to a large extent, taxation policy remains at national level, the federal government has a significant role in setting the framework for and financing certain initiatives in the field of lifelong learning.

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 year¹. The training must be related to the individual's job and fulfill 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*.

1.2.2 Public Sector Initiatives in the Flemish Community

The question of validation of non-formal and informal learning has become a significant policy issue in Flanders, where, as in the Netherlands, the concept is generally referred to under the heading of *Erkenning van Verworven Competenties* (Recognition of Acquired Competencies) or EVC. 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).

¹ For year 2003-04 – See <http://www.meta.fgov.be/ph/phb/frhb00.htm>

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 for operationalising 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, have been co-ordinated by the “EVC project group” within a newly established training organisation (DIVA⁷). This organisation and more recent developments are examined below, after a brief overview of the general approach to validation of non-formal and informal learning adopted in Dutch-speaking Belgium.

The Flemish Concept of Validation of Non Formal and Informal Learning

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. Moreover, 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 integration⁸.

The Flemish model of EVC has two aspects, as set out in the EVC advisory note⁹:

1. **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”,

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

⁸ http://edufora.vlaanderen.be/Projecten/EVC_Wat.html

⁹ *Ruim Baan voor Competenties 2002*

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.¹⁰

2. **Career and Personal Guidance** (formative function): the ultimate aim of this formative aspect of EVC is a system of lifelong career path guidance¹¹, 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”. Currently, any person can go to an officially accredited organisation for career and personal guidance. The challenge policy makers now face is to streamline these organisations and the organisations that will be accredited to assess people to certify their non-formal and informal learning.

In practical terms, EVC in Flanders comprises three main elements or stages¹²:

1. **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.
2. **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 SERV¹³ 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.).
3. **Recognition** (Erkenning): the formal recognition of competencies (potentially in the form of a vocational certificate) can theoretically be undertaken by any organisation that satisfies official regulations.

1.2.3 Public Sector Initiatives in the French Community

In French-speaking Belgium, debate about the validation of non-formal and informal learning has centred on the concept *validation des compétences*, within the framework of a *bilan de compétences* or individual record of achievement. A law on the *bilan de compétences* 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

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ levensloopbaanbegeleiding

¹² From *Oproep tot het indienen van voorstellen voor Pilotprojecten Erkenning Verworven Competenties 2003*, MinVG

¹³ *Sociaal-Economische Raad van Vlaanderen*

a *bilan de compétences* and to be assessed to identify and validate skills gained outside the formal education system¹⁴.

Since this time, the policy has been developed by a “consortium” of the four most important public sector training providers in French-speaking Belgium:

- *Enseignement de Promotion Sociale* (Adult Education Provider in the ‘communauté française’ – i.e. Wallonia and Brussels-Capital Regions);
- The *Institut de Formation des Petites et Moyennes Entreprises* (Training Agency for the Self Employed and SMEs in the Communauté Française);
- FOREM (the Walloon Employment and Professional Training Service, equivalent to the Flemish VDAB) and;
- *Bruxelles Formation* (Public sector training agency in the Brussels-Capital region).

This consortium is responsible for the definition of common standards (*référentiels*) for use in the French-speaking part of the country and the establishment a network of validation centres that will carry out certification by provided *titres de compétences*. These certificates will not, on their own, be equivalent to standard diplomas, but are designed to facilitate access to further training courses and can be accumulated to obtain a qualification, if the sum of the individual *titres* satisfies appropriate criteria. The validation centres will be established training providers run by the consortium partners.

Policy developments on the validation of skills follow on from earlier restructuring in the adult education sector. Since the adoption of a new legal framework in 1991¹⁵, 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 undertake the course in question¹⁶.

Objectives of Validation des Compétences

The Consortium in charge of implementing the validation of skills policy has defined competency in terms of the set of measurable skills necessary to undertake certain tasks in a workplace situation. In other words, the system envisaged will be geared towards measuring skills of direct relevance to specific job profiles. The system will make use job profiles developed by the French ROME system and by the *Commission Communautaire des Professions et des Qualifications* (CCPQ) (see below).

¹⁴ compétences « buissonnières »

¹⁵ The Decree of 16 April 1991

¹⁶ <http://www.enseignement.be/citoyens/annuaires/promsoc/propos.asp>

Current Situation

Although the law on the bilan des compétences was due to enter into force towards the end of 2002, the need to develop appropriate validation and assessment structures meant that the system was not operationalised until the beginning of 2004. Even now, the websites of the main players (such as the Consortium partners) make little explicit reference to the validation of skills and it is not always clear to potential users whether the system is up and running.

1.3 Review of existing initiatives: Private Sector

1.3.1 Professional Profiles

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 is overseen by Belcert¹⁷, the body responsible for accrediting organisations that certify products, quality systems and individuals. Belcert uses ISO/IEC 17024 (former EN 45013) on certifying individuals as a reference and certification organisations have been accredited in a number of sectors, including construction and catering.
- In French-speaking Belgium, the *Commission Communautaire des Professions et des Qualifications* (CCPQ) has developed a set of qualification and training profiles (see: http://www.enseignement.be/prof/info/documentation/profils_menu6.asp), in close consultation with sector representatives and the unions. These profiles specify the competencies required for each professional profile, together with associated indicators. These profiles, together with the French system ROME, are being used as a basis for validation standards (*référentiels*) in the development of the new validation system¹⁸.

1.3.2 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. Research¹⁹ 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.

¹⁷ http://mineco.fgov.be/redir_new.asp?loc=/organization_market/accreditation/belcert/home_en.htm

¹⁸ Le dispositif de validation des compétences : Aujourd'hui sur papier, en vigueur très bientôt! - http://www.febisp.be/Menu_feBISP/services_F.html

¹⁹ See for example: *La validation des compétences buissonnières, quels enjeux pour les entreprises?* - CRIFA

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.

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 (CRIFA²⁰) 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
- validation of these tools and desired outcomes within the firm (training centre and Human Resources department)
- implementation of training plan

This is an interesting example of internal validation.

1.4 Review of existing initiatives: 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 (*Dienst Informatie Vorming en Afstemming* – see above).

Together with a wide range of social and cultural groups, SoCiuS is developing a strategy and “reference framework” for lifelong and “life wide” learning from the perspective of the social-cultural adult education sector. As part of its role within DIVA, the organisation is in the process of producing a handbook and a basic training programme for the sector. For more information, see: <http://www.socius.be/modules/indexabout.php?id=111>

²⁰ Centre de Recherche sur l'Instrumentation, la Formation et l'Apprentissage

1.5 Stakeholders

1.5.1 DIVA

In response to the 2000 Lifelong Learning Action Plan and the Advisory Note on EVC, the Flemish government created a new body to bring together the main actors in the field of training and lifelong learning in Flanders. DIVA, the Training and Alignment Information Service, were responsible for overseeing the first round of five pilot projects in the field of EVC from January to December 2003 and is currently supervising a second round of four projects, which started in December 2003 and will finish in December 2004.

The projects were:

First Round

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

At the time of writing this report the remit of DIVA is under scrutiny and being revised. DIVA will have to concentrate on establishing closer cooperation between education and training providers. EVC activities will be stopped and transferred to a new organisation. It is, however, already clear that DIVA will not be the reference institution in Flanders for validation of non-formal and informal learning. The main actors will be the social partners especially when it comes to priorities and standard setting for the vocational certificates. From a lifelong learning perspective, other actors, from, for example, the fields of social or voluntary work will also have a vital role to play. However, at this point in time there is not yet a clear view as to what form this role will take.

Case Study Project: assessing the competencies of childcare workers

The VIVO project aims to identify and validate the competencies of childcare workers. Currently the majority of childcare workers who provide care for school children needing a place to stay before and after school hours have no qualification in childcare. This is because some 15 years ago an employment initiative was brought in allowing unqualified individuals into these services. The VIVO project aims both to assess the competencies of these workers to determine whether they need to enroll on a short training module, and, if appropriate, to certify their existing experience. This is important because a new quality act states that at least 50% of people working in these services have to possess a diploma of secondary schooling. Gaining the diploma or alternatively a vocational certificate after being assessed and referred under the VIVO project would mean that previously unqualified childcare workers are able to keep working in childcare (the vocational certificate could be recognized by the funding department as equal to the diploma).

In addition to the pilot projects listed above, DIVA has asked a research group from Gent University to conduct a study on the possibility of using a uniform portfolio format and methodology in order to align education and training providers: career guidance and counseling services; and assessment centres for vocational certificates. This should be to the benefit of the individual who is then able to use the same portfolio in all these organizations and routings. The research group has also produced recommendations on a common “platform” for learning portfolios and learning certificates (*Leerbewijzen*) and accompanying quality standards. The final report was submitted at the end of 2003 to DIVA which has made its own recommendations on the basis of the report to the Flemish government.

1.5.2 The Flemish Ministry of Education, Training and Employment and Vocational certificates as a Public Authority Initiative in the Flemish Community

The Flemish Minister of Education, Training and Employment has made it one of his priorities for 2005 to start implementing EVC by means of ‘vocational certificates’. The idea is to assess people according to the EVC principles. The standard for assessment and validation will be set by SERV (the Social and Economic Council) (see below) in cooperation with the social partners. After filling in a portfolio, candidates and their portfolio will be assessed using the SERV standard. The assessor will then advise the candidate on whether to return to guidance or to undergo training towards the vocational certificate. The Department of Employment will award the vocational certificate upon successful completion of the training.

1.5.3 The Social and Economic Council: Occupational profiles

In Flanders, SERV (Social and Economic Council) started to develop occupational profiles (or competence profiles) and occupational structures (i.e. classifications of core jobs and functions in industry and social services) some eight years ago. SERV works in close partnership with the social partners to validate the profiles and occupational structures. These profiles and occupational structures are used by the Department of Education to describe learning outcomes for initial technical and vocational education, by VDAB (the Flemish

Employment and Training Service) to update and validate the CO.BR.A-system (see below) (the CO.BR.A-files are actually based on a shorter version of the SERV-profiles), and VIZO to update their system of dual learning and their courses for young entrepreneurs. SERV's publications can be found on the website: www.serv.be, follow 'beroepsprofielen'.

1.5.4 CO.BR.A

In Flanders, a professional profile classification system - CO.BR.A²¹ - has been developed on the basis of the French system ROME²². COBRA contains 550 "professional cluster" profiles, where the basic requirements for each "cluster" or profile are the same. The professional profiles are structured on a sectoral basis and each profile is linked to a specific set of competencies (including knowledge, skills and attitudes). The system is used by the Flemish Employment and Training Service (VDAB), where it is used as an information resource alongside the service's vacancy and CV (Jobseekers) databases. See <http://www.vdab.be/cobra/default2.shtml> for more information.

1.6 Conclusions

The importance of recognizing skills gained through non-formal and informal learning is very 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.

²¹ Competenties en Beroepen Repertorium voor de Arbeidsmarkt

²² Répertoire Opérationnel des Métiers et des Emplois