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

## Examples of Good Practice – Corus Group

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## **1.0 EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE - CORUS GROUP**

*By James Winter and Emmy Nelissen (ECOTEC Research and Consulting)*

### **1.1 Introduction**

Corus is an international steel and aluminium manufacturing and services company with an annual turnover of 11.5 billion euros and operating in over 40 countries worldwide. The Netherlands division of the company employs a workforce of 11,000 people. The Corus Training Centre, based in IJmuiden, North West of Amsterdam, is the training arm of the company in the Netherlands, and is responsible for the development of the validation programme (or, in Dutch, ‘Elders Werworen Competenties’ – EVC) within Corus.

### **1.2 Nature of activity**

A portfolio based model of validating learning which has occurred in the workplace by non-formal means. The beneficiaries are awarded nationally recognised diplomas; MBOs, or ‘middelbaar beroepsonderwijs’ (secondary vocational training), of which there are 4 levels. The validation process takes place following a request from the person’s line manager, based on the demand within the company for the recognition of the skills which the person has. The aim is to bring individual employees’ qualification levels to the appropriate level for the type of work they are doing. Corus’ training and EVC obligations are formalised through a labour agreement with the trade unions. The initiative is completely funded by the Corus Group.

### **1.3 Partners**

The profolio initiative has been developed and supported by a partnership of Public/ State bodies, private organisations, including Corus, amongst others.

**Table 33.2 Partnership Corus validation initiatives**

<b>Sector</b>	<b>Names of organisation</b>
Public/state bodies	ROC – Regional Training Centre ( <i>Regionaal Opleidingen Centrum</i> ). These regional colleges for secondary vocational training are used to provide the validation for qualifications at Level 4. For level 5 qualifications – high schools ( <i>hogescholen</i> ), which offer professional higher education, are used as partners.
Private organisations	Vigor Transitions – an organisation that provides a link between Novacollege (a regional training centre/ROC) and the Corus Training Centre. The EVC process for Corus employees has 2 parts – the technical side and the assessment of the person’s potential to learn more. Vigor Transitions is involved in the assessment of this potential.

#### **1.4 Aims and objectives**

The aim of the EVC (validation) activity being undertaken by Corus Training Centre is threefold:

- For a company of Corus' type, it is difficult to find and maintain the right staff. EVC is a tool by which Corus can increase the flexibility of the workforce. It also helps ensure that employees are allocated the most appropriate work to their skills and abilities. It is recognised that most employees will not be able to undertake the same type of work throughout their career; therefore EVC provides a system allowing staff to make transitions from one area of working to another.
- Cost advantages – EVC offers Corus considerable savings in terms of training staff. A cost benefit analysis (see Annex 1) undertaken by the company demonstrated that validating previously acquired staff skills via EVC was much cheaper than training staff through traditional means. Traditional methods for training imply that a given employee will be away from the workplace for a considerable length of time, which often means the company has to pay for a replacement in the meantime. On the other hand, EVC minimises the impact on the individual's productivity within the company.

#### **1.5 Project development**

The project started around 2 years ago, when the Corus Training Centre began looking into alternative ways of training staff. The first EVC pilot within Corus emerged at around the same time as the Dutch government began developing the basis for EVC at the national level. At the end of the first pilot, the process and results were evaluated, and it was modified and re-initiated in the form of a second pilot. After this second pilot, the board of the Training Centre was asked to approve it, and EVC became an official training programme within Corus.

#### **1.6 Policy background**

During the past few years, the Dutch government has been increasingly concerned about the number of younger people leaving school with few or no diplomas. They drafted a programme to bring people's qualifications up to level 2 within the national system. EVC was the tool developed to achieve this aim. As mentioned above, the development of the Corus initiatives coincided with the government's development of EVC.

#### **1.7 Activities**

The EVC programme run by the Corus Training Centre involves the following activities:

##### **1) 'Intake' phase and initial assessment**

A flow chart was created (see Annex section of this report) to help manage the EVC process; the chart is the central reference point for the validation process of all individuals

within Corus NL. Individual staff members cannot request EVC themselves; rather they have to be recommended for it by their line managers. This ensures that the validation process is relevant to the company's needs. The process starts with an 'intake' of people aiming for the same qualification. Assessments are made of their educational and professional background to see if this provides a suitable platform via which they can gain the qualification. Validation is only provided for the next level up on the national qualification system – for example, if someone already has level 2 MBO qualifications, he/she can only undergo validation with a view to achieving level 3 qualifications.

## **2) *Portfolio preparation***

Following this initial assessment, the person is then shadowed at their workplace by an assessor; photographs are taken, working practices are assessed and a portfolio is created<sup>1</sup>. The work that is assessed has to be appropriate to the level of qualification that the person is aiming for. The findings of this assessment are then discussed with the line manager, a senior manager and the employee. Everyone has to agree with the assessment rating given before the process can move on to the next stage. Vigor Transitions is then asked if it can undertake an assessment of the learning potential for the individual in question. A starting date for the training process is then arranged.

## **3) *Vigor Transitions –evaluating the candidates' potential***

Vigor Transitions is a partner organisation working with Corus Training Centre in the running of their EVC programme. Created in 2001, and working with Corus for the past 2 years, their role is to assist in the portfolio development of the candidates. They evaluate the general personal competences of each candidate undergoing EVC before they proceed onto the technical assessment stage. Vigor transitions also work in collaboration with Nova College and the *Hogeschool* of Amsterdam. One of the grounding principles of Vigor Transitions is that the workplace is a richer learning environment than that of formalised education. This is why the organisation sends educational assessors to the workplace and not vice-versa. Furthermore, the concept of 'competence' as defined by Vigor Transitions is defined in terms of work that other people (managers etc.) trust you to undertake. This is why the EVC process in Corus includes consultation with the managers, peers and subordinates that work with each candidate in order to establish what their competences are.

Vigor Transitions recognise the importance of legitimacy in any assessment activity of this nature, and aim to implement standards which are in fact higher than that of the traditional routeways for qualification. They are currently working with the Ministry of Education to establish a system for accreditation to further enhance the legitimacy of their activities.

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<sup>1</sup> In some countries this may be considered against the protection of privacy of the individuals. This case can also raise some ethical issues reflected in the European Common Principles on validation of non-formal and informal learning.

#### ***4) 'Filling the gap' between competencies and qualification aimed for***

Following this, the Vigor Transitions report is then passed on to the Regional Training Centre (ROC), and they are asked to take on the technical part of the training process. The training centre then assesses the 'gap' that remains (if any) between the competences the candidate has, and the competences required in order to achieve the qualification. When a gap is identified, the school then takes on the task of completing the candidates training. This training has to take place within the candidate's workplace. Materials and equipment used are also those that the candidate uses within the workplace.

#### ***5) Certification***

Finally, at the end of the process, if the candidate has been successful, the ROC provides them with a certificate stating the MBO qualification achieved.

### ***1.8 Project management and monitoring***

As mentioned above, the project has been developed following pilot projects, which allowed the team responsible for the EVC programme to identify weaknesses and accordingly make improvements. For example, after the first pilot, it was observed that communication for EVC was relatively poor; the communication aspects of the programme were assessed and improved, and 6 months later the pilot was restarted. A cost-benefit analysis completed relating to the EVC programme within the Corus group also demonstrated the added-value of the activities and showed how it helped the company make considerable savings on training and staff development.

#### ***EVC team:***

Within the Corus Training Centre there are 3 members of staff responsible for the EVC programme within the company. They hire around 20 people to undertake the assessments from outside the Corus Training Centre.

#### ***Take-up numbers:***

To date, around 400 people have been recommended to go through the EVC process developed by the Corus Training Centre. Of those, around 30% are not deemed to be suitably experienced or have suitable potential to continue with the EVC process. These employees are sent through the traditional training pathway (again, funded by Corus) for gaining higher qualifications.

#### ***Profiles of EVC candidates:***

There is no one single job type for which EVC is applied within Corus, indeed, the model is flexible enough to be applied to any area of work within Corus NL. Job types for which EVC

is applied include steelmakers, maintenance technicians, processing workers, photographers, office staff and fire safety workers.

### **1.9 Outcomes**

- ***For the individuals***

From the individual's point of view, the main benefit of the EVC programme is that it allows them to gain higher level qualifications via their employer without the need to give up their job. EVC is often a vehicle for individuals to make progress within the company and gain promotions. Staff can pass through the EVC process multiple times, with a mandatory gap of 3 years between assessment periods (to allow the individual to gain enough experience on the job to pass through the next level of EVC).

It has also been observed that employees who have successfully completed an EVC cycle through Corus return to work with a greater self-esteem; which is not surprising considering that some of the candidates are people who have been on the labour market for several decades, and previously had no formal qualifications. This in turn helps improve motivation and morale in the workplace.

- ***For the organisation***

For the organisation, one of the benefits is customer satisfaction – Corus Netherlands has many high profile and prestigious customers, such as Ford, Volkswagen and Audi. These customers have exacting demands regarding quality and require that the people producing the material used in their manufacturing processes have a certain level of qualifications. For the company, the practice is aimed at maximising the potential of the workforce. The EVC process allows Corus to develop the qualifications of its staff to a higher level, while minimising the costs of so doing. Furthermore, EVC leads to the interlinked results of greater retention of staff and employee satisfaction. This saves the company having to continually look for and train staff from outside the company in order to meet production demands.

### **1.10 Sustainability**

Validation of prior learning is viewed by the EVC team at the Corus Training Centre as a practice that is set to stay in the Netherlands. It is becoming an increasing normal way to train/educate people, and is likely to continue to do so.

### **1.11 Transferability**

The model for EVC developed by the Corus Training Centre is highly transferable; as it can be applied to many different types of work (see above). This transferability is demonstrable by the fact that Corus asked another company, Nuon, an electricity generating company to test its model. For the individual, the validation practice utilised by Corus also has a strong transferable element – it is company policy to ensure that validation achieved for an individual in one factory is recognised in all Corus factories within the Netherlands – further enhancing the mobility of the workforce.

### ***1.12 Dissemination and networking***

All the EVC courses provided for Corus staff are fully documented and the procedures for obtaining the diploma are fully explained. When an EVC course reaches the examination stage, the EVC unit asks the examining board to go inside the factory to obtain feedback on implementation.

Regarding networks, Corus Training Centre is well connected with validation related networks in the Netherlands. The head of the EVC unit within the organisation has been involved in various commissions dealing with the subject. There are also links with the KVC (Knowledge Centre for Validation of Competences), high schools, government and other organisations that use EVC.

### ***1.13 Barriers to be overcome***

There are no barriers to take-up as such, although, as mentioned above, an employee can only be recommended to undertake an EVC programme by their line manager, to ensure that the validation will meet a real need within the company.

### ***1.14 Looking to the future***

#### ***At project level***

One of the future innovations planned for the use of EVC within the Corus group is planned for employees who are unable to work due to illness/injury. EVC has been tested as a tool to enable them to return to the workplace, although not necessarily to the same type of work. Naturally, when someone is ill, it is not possible to assess their work competences, however, the compilation of their personal portfolio can be initiated. This can help start the process towards conversion from one working area to another, since the EVC programme not only assesses an individual's competences acquired, but also their *potential* for further training (the EVC team believe that all jobs have a technical component and an intellectual component – it is the latter that is dealt with when initiating EVC with people who are off work due to sickness). For example, this process has led in the case of one employee to convert from the steel production process to logistics work within the company hospital.

#### ***At national policy level***

At the national level, EVC continues to gain importance, and further changes are planned for the EVC programme. The State Secretary for Education, Culture and Science, Mark Rutte is proposing a bill to modify the first law on EVC which was initiated in 1999. The new legislation is due to come into effect in January 2006.

***At EU policy level***

In spite of a number of recent encouraging developments validation at the European level is still very much in its infancy; therefore, it is a little early for Corus to make definitive comments on developments. However, the company recognises the importance of validation at the European level, and is involved in exchange of information in this area. For example, the director of the EVC team in the Corus Training Centre will be attending and speaking at a conference on validation of informal and non-formal learning in Brussels in April 2005.