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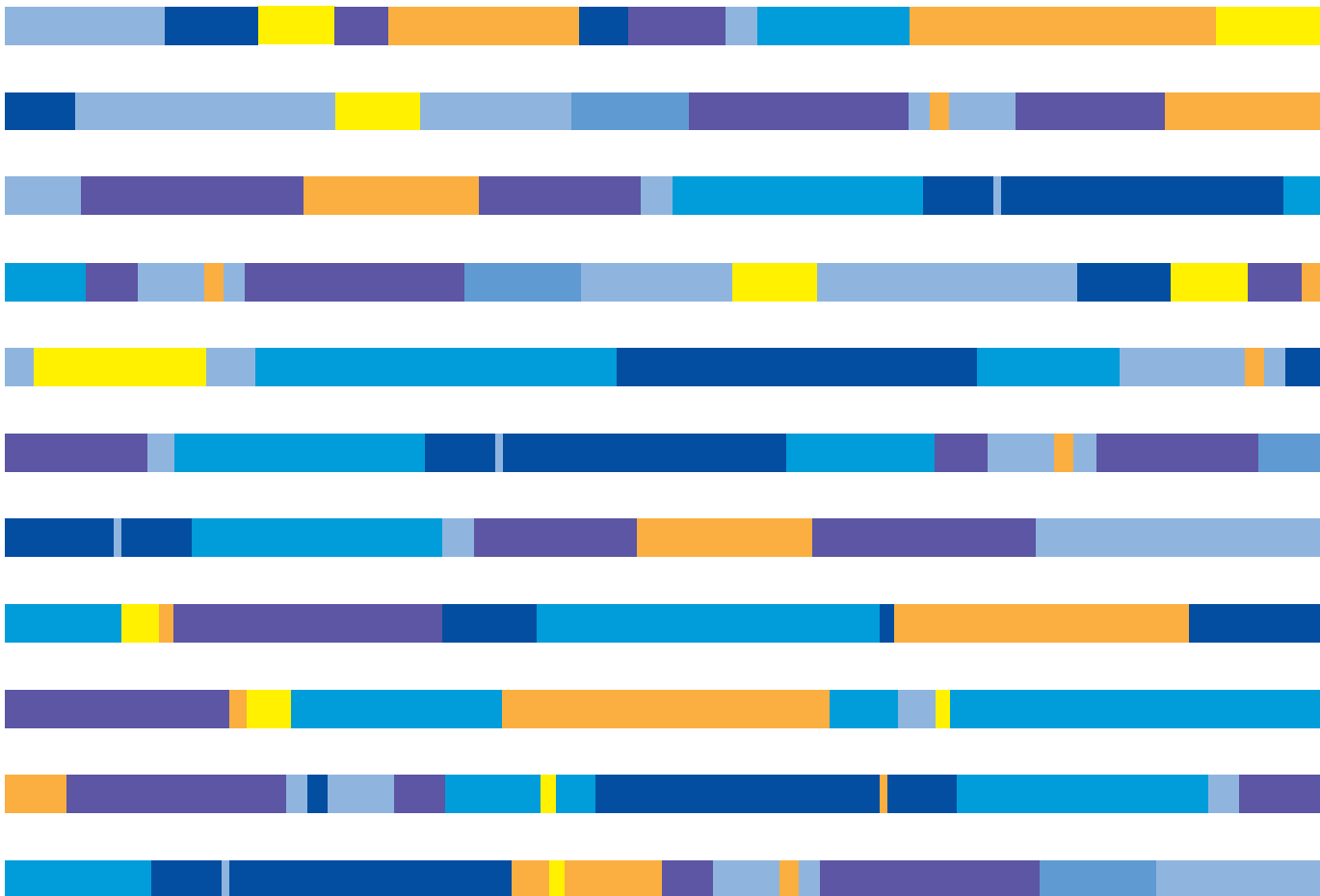
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# European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2023 update

COUNTRY REPORT:  
**NETHERLANDS**

Author: Ruud Duvekot



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# 1 Abstract

The national system for validation of non-formal and informal learning in the Netherlands was introduced in 1998 under the umbrella term EVC – ‘*Erkenning van Verworven Competenties*’ or ‘Validation of Prior Learning’ (VPL). In 2016 Dutch VPL was operationalised in a dual system with an education-route and a labour market route with a focus on turning policy into practice.

Nowadays, the term ‘Validation of Learning and Working Experiences (VLW)’ prevails. VLW concerns validation in the education route. In some cases, VLW is done using a ‘certificate of experience’ that is the result of a VPL procedure. VLW refers to all instruments to validate learning and work experiences such as validation by educational institutions, proprietary instruments of VPL providers or other private parties.

Development of Dutch VPL between 2018-2023 shows that the labour market route is growing in importance as an instrument to demonstrate acquired skills at the workplace for strengthening sustainable employability. The educational route with its higher turnover than the labour market route was more focused on integrating VPL in existing learning trajectories for intake-assessment, inclusion of designated target groups and innovating the traditional assessment practices.

# 2 Introduction

A national system for validation of non-formal and informal learning was introduced in the Netherlands in 1998 under the umbrella-term EVC – which stands for ‘*Erkenning van Verworven Competenties*’ or in English ‘Validation of Prior Learning’ (VPL). The general term used nowadays is ‘*Valideren van leer- en werkervaring*’, or in English ‘Validation of Learning and Working Experience (VLW)’. In this report, we refer to VLW and to VPL procedures. VLW concerns validation in the education route. In some cases, VLW is done using a certificate of experience that is the result of a VPL procedure. VLW refers to all other instruments to validate learning and work experience such as validation by educational institutions, proprietary instruments of VPL providers or other private parties.

A major shift in the national strategy occurred in 2016 with the introduction of a dual system, in which ‘the worlds of learning and working’ on the one hand and the responsibilities of the individual on the other (provision and utilisation of VLW arrangements) are integrated. The dual system consists of two pathways, one is linked to the education system and the other one to the labour market, depending on the need for a qualification on top of the need for employability (MOCW/MSZW, 2015, MSZW, 2022):

1. **The education route:** learning outcomes and competences of an individual are validated against national qualification standards. The goal for the learner is to validate his or her formally/informally/non-formally acquired competences in order to obtain a formal qualification. Tools are intake-assessment, e-portfolio, competence tests, ECVET methods, etc. An ‘*ervaringscertificaat*’ can be part of the assessment of someone’s learning outcomes but is not essential for obtaining exemptions or a partial/full qualification. As the dual pathway is organised there is no longer an exclusive role for the ‘*ervaringscertificaat*’. The awarding bodies for qualifications (in general exam committees of VET-schools or universities who are only functional within the autonomy of their VET-school or university) can also use the other mentioned instruments.
2. **The labour market route:** VPL processes or procedures are used for the career guidance of adults on the labour market. Prior learning outcomes of individuals are validated against sector/organisation standards or national qualification standards. VPL processes or procedures are also designed to support intra- or inter-sector employability of people. Tools are the intake assessment, e-portfolio, the ‘*ervaringsprofiel*’ (experience profile), competence tests, assessments, workspot observations/performance assessment) etc. In case of a VPL procedure applied by an accredited VPL provider, the result is an ‘*ervaringscertificaat*’ (‘certificate of experience’) that either can be part of a personal dossier for VLW in the education route, or in the labour market route can be crowned by

a 'vakbekwaamheidsbewijs' (Certificate for Vocational Competence) for linkage with professional standards, and/Competences).

Both routes have a value of their own: either for obtaining a national qualification or for career progression at sector or organisation level. In the Dutch system's dual approach, the objectives of the adult learner are central to VLW and VPL processes, either for obtaining a formal qualification or for employability and inclusion. This dualism exemplifies the motives of learners and their organisations for lifelong learning, with VPL procedures or processes used for the purpose of improving the employability and educational attainment levels of the workforce. The same goes for realising the impact of learning in the conditional (participation), reactive (updating of competences) and proactive (upgrading and innovating) spheres (Gielen, *et al.*, 2009).

### Progress in the two routes since 2018

Development of Dutch validation arrangements between 2018-2023 shows that the labour market route is growing in importance with VPL procedures or processes as an instrument to validate acquired skills and competences at the workplace for strengthening sustainable employability. The educational route is in the same period more focused on integrating VLW in qualifying, quality-assured learning trajectories for intake-assessment and justifying exemptions. VLW also supports activities for including designated target groups and innovating traditional assessment practices.

Progress can be reported in both routes:

- The continuing focus on turning policy into practice. Apart from strengthening linkage of both validation systems, the quality of validation services offered and the options for tailored learning, and raising the awareness of learners, employers and teachers remain critical success factors. On both levels, system and users, actions have been agreed by the stakeholders in both validation routes to strengthen linkage of validation outcomes from the labour market route to the education route, to enhance tailored learning options as impact of VLW in education and VPL processes on the labour market and to do a critical review of the legal frameworks for VLW.
- The labour market route was strengthened by the government through the STAP-facility. The STAP-facility offers budgets for workers and jobseekers to encourage training, including VPL procedures since 2022. The personalised STAP budget is maximised at €1,000 (incl. VAT). However, the STAP-facility is ending in 2023. The government is looking for new ways to continue encouraging learning and development from 2024. (<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/leven-lang-ontwikkelen/leven-lang-ontwikkelen-financiele-regelingen/stap-budget>)
- In the education route HE Institutes are experimenting in making their programmes more flexible by integrating independent learning and validation (Casteren, *et al.*, 2021). VLW is at the core of this experimentation. In this learning outcomes experiment, 21 public and private universities of applied sciences worked for five years to make more than 400 part-time and dual associate degree and bachelor's programmes more flexible. FastSwitch is an example of such a flexible, higher education programme. FastSwitch works with a job guarantee and a Match & Go approach. It stands for fast retraining to promising professions in the shortage sectors of education, care, engineering and IT. (<https://fastswitch.nl>)
- In VET, the focus is on the introduction of partial qualifications and validation of work experiences. The government initiated the innovation platform *MBOin2030 [VET in 2030]* which is geared at providing an infrastructure in VET in which learners can learn anywhere, formally and informally. This should ensure lifelong learning and further development. VLW in this setting is paramount for providing quality-assured linkages between personal, qualification and occupational standards (Duvekot, Brouwer and Verhoeven, 2020).

## 3 National perspective

### 3.1 Overarching approach to validation

The national system for validation of non-formal and informal learning in the Netherlands was introduced in 1998 under the umbrella term EVC – which stands for ‘*Erkenning van Verworven Competenties*’ or in English ‘Validation of Prior Learning’ (VPL). This validation system is intended to take stock of existing knowledge and skills. The general term used nowadays is ‘*Valideren van leer- en werkervaring*’, or in English ‘Validation of Learning and Working Experience (VLW)’.

In this report, we refer to VLW and to VPL procedures. VLW concerns validation in the education route. In some cases, VLW is done using a certificate of experience that is the result of a VPL procedure. VPL procedures or processes refer to all other instruments to validate learning and work experience such as validation by educational institutions, proprietary instruments of VPL providers or other private parties.

*Rather than being half empty, Dutch VLW takes the view that the glass is half full!* (Werkgroep EVC, 2000). This motto is based on a number of basic principles underlying this:

- VLW recognises that learning on the job or via other informal learning situations (learning through practical experience) can in principle deliver the same (professional) skills and qualifications as learning within formal (classroom-based) situations.
- Recognition means awarding certificates or diplomas based on generally recognised standards, such as national qualifications in education. Obviously, there are also other standards relating to the labour market which employers and employees regard as relevant. External legitimacy is the key requirement for recognition.
- VLW is not a goal in itself. It contributes to the desire to develop individuals' skills and to strengthen human capital management within companies. It is an important means for realising permanent labour market suitability and deployment.
- For people already in employment, skills can be developed, which these individuals do not yet have, but which both they and their employers regard as necessary. In such cases, VPL procedures act as a reliable yardstick for determining the existing skills and qualifications held by the individual employee. Based on this inventory, a tailor-made training or development path can be formulated if needed or wanted.
- Rational investment in training by companies and by society as a whole assumes an understanding of existing skills and qualifications, or the stock of skills and qualifications in the company respectively. VPL-procedures make it possible to identify the need for skills and qualifications in a specific context and link these needs to the already available skills and competences in the staff. This affords decisions on investments needed in training.
- The provision of flexible or customised training courses assumes that we can gauge a person's existing skills level. VPL procedures can improve the match between education and the labour market by identifying concrete learning needs that can be filled-in by accredited learning providers. This applies especially to occupational standards that are linked to formal qualification requirements.
- A VPL procedure or process in the labour market is designed to assess the learning outcomes of professional activities in unison with other informal outcomes and prior formal learning outcomes. The assessment results can not only provide valuable feedback on a personal level but also on the system-level of human resources management as well as of qualification systems.
- The ‘*Ervaringscertificaat*’ (Certificate of Experience) is a certificate that can only be awarded if it is carried out by an accredited ‘VPL-provider’ in the labour market route. Since 2016 this accreditation is managed by the *Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC* (NKEVC) for VPL procedures in the labour market route. This certificate is used to assess and recognise the

competences (both vocational and general) of a candidate in relation to sectoral or formal educational standards (branch or sector qualification). It can also be used in the education route for obtaining exemptions or a partial/full qualification for a VET qualification or a HE qualification. Required is that the VPL provider and the educational institution have made cooperation agreements for this purpose.

- The '*vakbekwaamheidsbewijs*' (certificate of professional competence) is a VPL procedure in the labour market route that provides proof of one's knowledge and skills and competences. This certificate has value in the labour market route for employees and employers.

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

Different phases in the development of the validation system in the Netherlands can be distinguished since the formal publication on validation in 2000 (Werkgroep EVC, 2000):

- Until 2006, the main objective was to encourage the take up of VPL in general. Government, schools/colleges/universities and social partners (trade unions and employers) focused on creating favourable circumstances for developing and implementing VPL in as many contexts as possible: in work, in voluntary work, in reintegration and job-seeking, in education and training. This approach was the initial responsibility of the Dutch Knowledge Centre on VPL ('*Kenniscentrum EVC*') and focused on the change of the learning culture in general and enhancing an open eye for the value of informal and non-formal learning experiences on individual level.
- From 2006, a greater focus was put on quality assurance to increase accessibility and transparency and to guarantee the summative effects by means of certification or qualification. The role of the *Kenniscentrum EVC (NKEVC)* changed from overall responsibility for all features of VPL, to supporting quality.
- There was a change of strategy for validation after 2013 in relation to the government's drive towards 'a participative society' in which all stakeholders have to take ownership and responsibility for their own role in (lifelong) learning. The focus is on using VPL as a dual instrument for validating people's learning outcomes, linked not only to national qualifications but also to career guidance on the labour market (sector level training or non-formal learning). This third phase of implementing VPL in Dutch practice in education and on the labour market can be referred to as the phase of turning policy into practice in which the focus is on a learning path independently practicing developed procedures, tools and linking-opportunities for all learners in dialogue with their organisations in the education and labour market routes. The Dutch Qualification Framework (NLQF) provides transparency between qualifications in the educational and labour market route.
- Ever since the dual system was operationalised in 2016, the focus has been on turning policy into practice. Apart from strengthening linkage of both validation systems, the quality of validation services offered, the options for tailored learning, and raising the awareness of learners, employers and teachers are the main critical success factor. Stakeholders in both VPL routes have agreed on actions at both the system-level and user-level, including improving the linkage and quality of VLW and VPL procedures, providing tailored learning options as a result of validation arrangements, critically reviewing legal frameworks, and last but not least, realising the concept of learning outcomes in education and training programs.

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

- Validation of Learning and Working Experiences (VLW) can take place in a quality assured setting and in linkage with a national standard (educational or occupational standards).
- VLW may also focus on someone's potential or employability and result in a learning or career advice. In this case, VPL processes or procedures are the term used.

- Both public and private education and training institutions have integrated VLW arrangements into the quality assurance processes of the education system (the education route). Such arrangements may include the outcome of VPL-procedures of accredited VPL providers in the labour market route.
- Integration of VLW arrangements into formal learning processes has benefits for making education more flexible: learning outcomes as learning units, intake assessment, hybrid learning pathways, work-based learning, etc.
- In quantitative terms, VLW in the education route is much more used than VPL procedures in the labour market route, since VLW is more integrated in formal learning processes. VPL in the labour market route is gaining momentum due to labour market shortages and the rise of skills strategies.

The quantity of VLW in the education route is not recorded because of the integration of VLW in formal learning processes. The estimation is that especially in part-time and dual learning programmes much use is made of VPL for work-based learning experiences, as well as for learning through work-based tasks.

In the labour market route accredited VPL providers accounted for a total of 3.362 VPL procedures in 2022 leading to issuing an '*ervaringscertificaat*' (NKEVC, 2023). About 65% of these validation procedures were at VET-levels. These certificates are accredited within the labour market sector but are not part of the national qualifications as secured in the NLQF.

- VLW is integrated in learning path independent strategies for lifelong learning. These strategies are apparent in both routes and can be linked to:
  - The systemic level by means of referencing to either sector qualifications or to national qualifications.
  - The individual level by means of assessing someone's learning experiences for the sake of employability, qualification, personal development, second chance learning, empowerment or reflection on skills needs.
  - Due to the Corona crisis a different speed and need has arisen within the ecosystem of learning and development, focusing on more hybrid, flexible learning, enhancing skills' development and personalized learning.

### **VLW and personalised learning**

In the Netherlands, VPL is increasingly focused on an individual's learning outcomes and the use of these experiences for further learning or for career progression. VPL is a system which, regardless of the type of learning programme, focuses on recognising, valuing, validating and developing the competences that an individual has previously acquired in any type of learning environment (formal, non-formal or informal). Flexible learning is the dynamic learning concept focused on the individual learner, which can initiate (or help initiate) and establish individual tailored learning programmes in a learning culture based on self-driven, hybrid and forward-looking lifelong learning (Duvekot, 2016).

### **VLW in the national skills strategy**

There is no formal national skills strategy in the Netherlands. However, the skills-oriented labour market is seen as the key to improving the matching process when filling vacancies, mapping (missing) skills of (future) employees, developing strategic personnel policy and gearing training supply to the demand for desired learning outcomes and skills. With a focus on skills, optimal opportunities can be created for workers and jobseekers to keep developing efficiently and thus remain agile in the ever-changing labour market.

The role of validation in a skills-focused labour market is an important one. Validation methods can help both jobseekers and workers to value their skills and indicate how these skills can be further developed, either in the breadth of a sectoral approach or in the depth of a job group.



The use of a transparent, open data and common skills language enables services at the skills level. Skills-based systems/tools can be easily connected. This will allow employment agents to more easily guide people from job to job. (SER, 2021a).

### **Skills-auditing**

Concerning skills-auditing in the Netherlands, the public approach is centred around educational institutes in VET and HE for competence-development that is linked to nationally accredited diplomas and job agencies for skills-recognition of jobseekers for linking personal skills to vacancies.

The private approach is geared at skills-development in human resources management systems, based on occupational standards, and personal development roads for high-potentials or reallocation of people.

Within both approaches, there is also a 'market' for consultancy in qualification and human resources management systems on updating and personalising the existing qualification and career-roads available.

The specific group of job seekers has access to a skills-recognition system with which they can get a transparent overview of their main skills, related to certain sectors on the labour market and link themselves with occupations and certification opportunities<sup>1</sup>. Other target groups like refugees, unskilled and low-skilled might also get skills recognition, one way or another in local or national initiatives.

### **Lifelong learning policies**

The government is actively working with social partners and education partners to create a strong and ambitious learning and development culture in the Netherlands. A future-proof labour market is central. The envisaged culture change is about making learning and development self-evident and integrating it into daily activities as much as possible. This requires barriers to be removed, instruments to be readily available and easy to find, and motivation and urgency to get employees, employers and the self-employed moving. (MSZW, 2022a)

The government sees a major role for employer organisations, trade unions, branches and training funds. They have knowledge of and experience with employers and workers in companies and have a lot of experience in stimulating learning and development. Nationally, there will be close consultations with social partners in the Labour Foundation on the details of lifelong development policy, in which social partners have indicated that they want to take the initiative and direction and also see an active, firm and executive role for themselves.

The approach to strengthening the learning and development culture is along two lines:

1. The further development of an overall communication strategy and campaign from the three ministries involved to initiate a learning and development movement together with all stakeholders. The website [www.hoewerktnederland.nl](http://www.hoewerktnederland.nl) plays a connecting and informing role in this.
2. People and companies mainly move when sufficient motivation and urgency are felt. The realisation that learning and development on this labour market is not a 'nice to have' but a crucial investment still needs to penetrate people and companies. Here, too, the joint communication strategy already mentioned above plays an important role. This involves companies and individuals who can and want to act as ambassadors.

Through measures within these two policy lines, the government aims to foster a robust and collaborative learning and development culture among people, companies, and educators in the coming years. Well-trained talent ensures innovation and progress. But above all, it gives people the opportunity to further advance their careers, get more satisfaction from their work, keep their job or get a new one. Together with social partners, educational partners and other

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1 [https://www.werk.nl/werk\\_nl/werknemer/solliciteren/test](https://www.werk.nl/werk_nl/werknemer/solliciteren/test)

stakeholders, the government is jointly developing these policy lines that contribute to a more future-proof and inclusive labour market.

### Individual Learning Accounts

There is no formal system for individual learning accounts. Only the STAP-budget (2022-2023) offers some sort of individualised learning accounts on the labour market.

STAP is an annual subsidy available for anyone on the Dutch labour market to follow training activities, including VPL procedures. This subsidy is regulated in the STAP subsidy scheme. STAP stands for *STimuleren ArbeidsmarktPositie* [Stimulating Labour Market Position]. STAP is a subsidy scheme creating an individual learning account for the learner as a personal development budget (MSZW, 2022b)

STAP can be used to take part in training activities. However, these training activities must meet a number of conditions. These are:

- o training offered by Ministry of Education recognised trainers.
- o a limited number of branch and sector recognised education and training programmes.
- o education and training provided by NRTO-approved trainers.
- o training leading to a qualification or diploma classified by the NLQF and included in the NLQF register.

The STAP-facility offers budgets for workers and jobseekers to encourage training, including VPL procedures since 2022. Within STAP a separate scheme for a VPL-procedure has been established, whereby a subsidy can be granted to accredited VPL providers for carrying out a VPL procedure. The personalised STAP budget is maximised at €1,000 (incl. VAT). This STAP-facility is however already ending in 2023. The government is looking for new ways to continue encouraging learning and development from 2024.

### Database

In the Netherlands there is no database of qualifications that can be obtained through validation. The main idea behind the two validation routes is that the education route covers all formal qualification programmes. In theory, anybody may obtain formal qualifications and be exempted from undertaking formal education through validation. Therefore, there is no need to provide an extra database for validation in formal learning. The same goes for non-formal learning programmes in the labour market route.

Nevertheless, there are websites that provide an overview of formal and non-formal learning opportunities:

- An accessible overview of formal qualification programmes on VET and higher education levels is available for VET and for higher education at: <https://studiegids.nl/opleidingen/>.
- The website *Leeroverzicht.nl* [<https://leeroverzicht.nl/home>] offers an independent and comprehensive overview of available training courses in the Netherlands. This website covers all non-formal learning programmes: from practical learning, training and courses to training with a legally accredited diploma. It includes regular training courses paid for by the government, as well as courses provided by commercial training agencies. It also includes a complete overview of available financial schemes and of organisations providing career advice in any area or sector. The website *Leeroverzicht.nl* is commissioned by the Ministry of Education in cooperation with the Ministry of social Affairs, employers' and employees' organisations (VNO-NCW, MKB-Nederland, LTO Nederland, VCP, FNV, CNV) and the education umbrella organisations (MBO Raad, Vereniging Hogescholen VH, Union of Universities of the Netherlands VSNU and Nederlandse Raad voor Training en Opleiding NRTO).

## 3.2 Validation in education and training

In the dual system, *the education route* is linked to learning and competences of an individual that are validated against a national educational qualification. The goal for the learner is to

validate his or her competences in order to obtain a formal qualification. The main validation tools are intake-assessment, e-portfolio, competence tests, ECVET-methods, etc.

The awarding bodies for qualifications (in general: exam committees in VET or HE) can also use other instruments like criterion-based interviews, performance assessments and other learning-independent assessment techniques.

VLW in the Netherlands supports a strategy to bridge the gap between education supply and labour market demand. This is being realised by converting a learner's experiences into formal qualifications on the one hand and by allowing for the development of a learner's competences in a career context on the other (Werkgroep EVC, 2000).

### **Box 1: Dialogical validation for lateral entrants in disability care**

The Sherpa Foundation and VET-schools ROC Landstede and ROC Deltion are conducting a VLW pilot in which lateral entrants in disability care will, via a certification route, be able to obtain a two-level qualification within a year: Social Care Counsellor (VET level 3) or Personal Social Care Counsellor (VET level 4).

The starting point is 'dialogic validation' which links the methodology of identifying, valuing, recognising and advising on the further development of one's acquired competences to the needs of the organisation and the content of the qualification specification. The methodology focuses on creating an open dialogue and co-ownership of the learner in the validation and learning pathway.

Within the learning route, the partnership works with so-called 'learning meters'. These learning meters shift the learner's position in the path of dialogic validation and learning as soon as another development step is completed. VLW is thus active not only at the start of the personal learning process but also during and at its completion. The pilot in the disability care sector focuses on the question of how assessors/teachers can recognise, validate, and secure an individual's learning outcomes without relying on traditional examination or VPL procedures. The focus is on finding alternatives to these time-consuming and costly procedures, which could lead to more personalized learning pathways. This could include self-directed learning or pathways that can be completed incrementally, providing opportunities to enhance the learning experience.

With this pilot, VLW therefore contributes to strengthening the dialogue between learners (potential employees) and employers in order - facilitated by education - to solve labour market bottlenecks directly on the shop floor within disability care.

Source: <https://mboin2030.nl/nl/m/Landstede-MBO->

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

- In the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector, the Law on Adult & Vocational Education (WEB, 1996) was the first law where the foundation was laid for what was formally developed later in 1998 as the Dutch VLW policy.
- In Higher Education, the law "*Wet of het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek*" (WHW – law on higher education and scientific research) regulates the admission and exemption policy based on validation. Higher education institutions are left free to translate this regulation per programme in the "*Onderwijs en examenreglementen*" (OERs – rules on education and exams). It is important to note that the use of VPL is mainly offered in higher vocational education (HBO) and not so much in universities, apart from the Open University. Universities usually focus on accrediting only formally acquired learning outcomes.

Next to this legal framework, pilot initiatives began in 2016 in higher education for flexibilising learning routes for students in part-time and work-based learning programmes, aiming at strengthening lifelong learning strategies (Stb. 2016; MOCW, 2016). 'Flexibilisation' means that learning is provided and tracked independently of time and place and is based on learning outcomes. Thus, learning outcomes, which are central to the "flexibilization" approach, can be achieved or achieved regardless of location and time.

It is not about how and when, but about what someone has learned. Flexible learning encompasses both the validation of previously acquired learning outcomes and the acquisition of new learning outcomes through a personalised learning path that meets individual learning needs and context. By validating prior learning outcomes, flexible learning can directly align with the student's learning requirements, and when learning is requested, organised, and evaluated through a dialogue between the learner and the teacher, we can refer to it as personalized learning. The main experiences in the experiment regarding validation (Casteren *et al*, 2021; MSZW, 2022a):

- Students choose less (than expected) to do a validation procedure at the start of the programme. Reasons: costs a lot of time and energy and returns are uncertain; people start a programme after a long time and at the beginning they just want to follow the programme and be part of the learning community.
- Much use is made of the opportunity to have results of previous learning validated outside the programme during the programme, at the curriculum-independent assessment.
- Validation thus leads to relief of the study load rather than to shortening of the study with exemptions.

In 2019, following the interim evaluation of the pilot initiatives of 2016 (by Casteren, et al, 2019), the Minister of Education, Culture and Science announced that she would structurally anchor the frameworks for flexibilisation as used for the pilot initiatives in the Higher Education and Scientific Research Act (WHW) immediately after the end of the experiment. To enable that decision, the final evaluation was brought forward. In this final evaluation (Casteren, et al, 2021), the flexible learning concept in line with the learning outcomes experiment was acknowledged for being successful in attracting extra participants and new target groups to the programmes and in retaining these target groups, provided it was carefully implemented and supervised. FastSwitch for instance is intended for anyone (with work experience) who wants to quickly switch to a job in the shortage sectors of healthcare, IT, engineering and education. (<https://fastswitch.nl>). It is a flexible, higher education programme with job guarantee. FastSwitch works with a Match & Go approach and stands for fast retraining to promising professions in the (shortage) sectors of education, care, engineering and IT.

### **Box 2: Validation in higher education, the example of teacher education.**

In the memorandum 'Policy advice on the design of VLW in teacher education' (2021), the national VLW and exemptions policy working group drew up a national guideline for the assessment procedure. The Teacher Training Steering Group of the Association of Universities of Applied Sciences adopted this policy advice as part of the Administrative Agreement on Flexibility in Teacher Training (Oct 2021) in February 2021. Since from academic year 2021-22, pilots are being carried out at various colleges of higher education to test this guideline and training sessions of assessors and intakes are being organised.

The starting point for these validation pilots is that they will be conducted:

- By experienced intakers and assessors from their own colleges.
- Based on nationally applicable competence requirements, translated into concrete learning outcomes with corresponding learning outcomes.
- With its own VPL toolkit containing at least the following components:
  - o Participant manual containing the described Learning Outcomes/Training Objectives/Education Units with indicators/competence requirements and explanations on how to demonstrate them.
  - o Manual for Intakers and Assessors.
  - o Described Assessment Procedure (intake, possibly trial tests, interviews).
  - o Assessment framework for assessors.
  - o Adding a format for the assessment file.
  - o A clear translation of the national assessment framework (based on the nationally applicable proficiency requirements) from the VPL assessment to the programme's own learning outcomes/final attainment levels, which has been submitted to the examination

board for approval (and preferably discussed with the examination board at an early stage).

Source: Landelijke Werkgroep EVC- en vrijstellingenbeleid Lerarenopleidingen (2023). *Handreiking Brede Intake*. Tien voor de Leraar, Den Haag.

For the VET sector, the government encourages that training programmes are well aligned with the knowledge and skills people have already acquired through informal learning in the workplace. The Expertise Centre for Vocational Education and Training (Kennispunt MBO) initiated a project to enhance the knowledge base of members of examination committees in terms of capitalizing on evidence of prior informal and non-formal learning experiences of learners. Based on the teaching practices of 10 participating school-led teams, a toolkit was created for all VET schools. Among other things, this toolkit contains concrete hands-on tools, explanations of laws and regulations, formats and publications that VET schools can use immediately or for inspiration for their own working methods. (Web Reference Kennispunt MBO 2022; also see: <https://onderwijsenexamining.nl/nieuws/toolkit-valideren-bewijsmateriaal-ilo-gereed/>)

The innovation platform 'MBO in 2030' is the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science's approach in which, in co-creation with all stakeholders in and around the VET sector (MBO in Dutch), a vision of the future of VET and a corresponding action agenda are implemented. Technological developments such as digitisation, robotisation and artificial intelligence will have a major impact on the demand for labour, both in a qualitative and quantitative sense. Developments such as individualisation of learning and an ageing workforce in a complex society and the increasingly limited shelf life of knowledge as a result of all innovations are also leading to new demands on education, especially the VET sector. These developments take place against the background of a shortage of (specialised) teachers and a sharply shrinking number of initial students in secondary vocational education. For the students, teachers, administrators, companies, governments and other partners involved in VET, the stakes can be high. Only the interplay between all these different stakeholders will overcome these future challenges. The synergetic approach of 'MBO in 2030' thus aims to future-proof VET by positioning it, in dialogue with all stakeholders, as a flexible cooperation partner for issues around qualification, employability, inclusion and personal development of all learners in society. The themes addressed are dialogic validation [VPL], personalised learning, regional ecosystems and the changing role of teachers. See: [www.mboin2030.nl](http://www.mboin2030.nl)

Apart from using VLW as an instrument for awarding exemptions or partial/full qualifications for education programmes, it can also be used for admittance to higher education. Adults aged over 21 who do not meet the formal entry requirements can undergo a formal procedure called the '21+test', which tests the required level in Dutch, English and the specific subject of the programme. N.B. since institutes are free to set a standard for access to their programmes, the content of the testing might differ.

### **Box 3: cohort analysis 2022 at NCOI University of Applied Sciences**

Hogeschool NCOI has been involved in the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science's national Experiment Learning Outcomes of AD and Bachelor's programmes since February 2020. The aim of this experiment is to more effectively support lifelong learners to keep up to date, find and/or keep employment and continue to actively participate in society.

A cohort analysis was conducted among 141 students in 2022 on how to strengthen and/or improve the existing approach to flexible learning was conducted. These students started a part-time/dual pathway in academic year 2022-2023 in 12 fields of study: 1 AD and 11 bachelor's programmes. The cohort analysis resulted in the following conclusions regarding validation and learning:

- a. The analysis of the students' motivations for following this flexible pathway made it clear that the probability of study success (obtaining a certificate) is plausible due to the fact that for the highest-scoring motives, the students make a strong connection with their career: 'career step' and 'qualification'; only for 'personal development' and 'upgrade', the success probability may



be less because these motives can also be realised in case of following only a few modules and without reaching the finish line of the qualification.

- b. When it came to the value of the students' work experience at the start of the programme, it showed that determining this value of the student's performance is important to be able to determine to which and to what extent the student already has potentially valuable (work) experience that can be comparable to certain core tasks within the programme of the relevant programme.
- c. The value of the work experience at the level and content of the programme can be proven through professional products: evidence that provides information on design, implementation and evaluation of professional tasks of the student.
- d. The connection between the student's work experience and the content of the programme can be established by comparing the student's job-related tasks with the content of the core tasks or learning outcomes of the programme. In this regard, a low number of the programme's core tasks offers more perspective than a high number to make a student reflect on the possible connection of core tasks with the student's own (work) experience. What is important is that the student provides clear, qualitative information and insight into professional actions.
- e. Many programmes offer scope for an intake assessment combined with customisation through work-based learning based on appreciating the student's level of complexity in their own actions and independence in performing tasks in practice.
- f. The cohort analysis showed that the number of students who could demonstrate core tasks/learning outcomes based on acting in professional practice was significant, covering all years of training from year 1 to year 4.
- g. The validation approach can be described as a process whereby the student is facilitated in reflecting on the programme's core tasks and substantiating work experience for the purpose of the intake assessment. The outcome of the assessment provides immediate exemption from certain core tasks and gives access to a customised pathway in which work-based learning e-learning and classroom or group learning are possible for the remaining study components.

Source: Hogeschool NCOI (2023) *Cohortanalyse flexibel leren in het HBO bij Salta Group Professional Education Deelstudie 1: de route naar maatwerk*. Hilversum, NCOI.

### 3.3 Validation and the labour market

The Socio-Economic Council (SER, 2021b) set the stage for an integrated lifelong learning policy in which validation arrangements are a major cornerstone in the labour market route. The SER recommends investing in necessary adjustments in the context of major transitions underway in society: in training and (lifelong) development, in the organisation and infrastructure to offer people the opportunities to remain employable in their current jobs or to be guided to new jobs that offer fair pay, security and control, and in improved social security where necessary. The SER proposes to structurally promote lifelong learning by ensuring an integrated approach with a national vision and direction to encourage employees and employers to periodically identify developments in the skills needed. To offer people a dynamic career policy, (independent and easily accessible) services are needed, using instruments such as retraining, VPL procedures and work-based learning. The social partners are responsible for these services and organise the pathways needed to offer sustainable job prospects and move to a new job. Training funds can play a role here when it comes to training and support, in the transfer of skills within and between sectors.

The SER initiated the Action agenda Lifelong Development to collect and display good examples of places where learning is already taken for granted. This allows others to be inspired and new collaborations to emerge. The SER advises on possibilities in legislation and regulations. The SER also collects opportunities and problems to be discussed with representatives of national organisations and policymakers. With this agenda the SER brings people into contact with each other and helps to exchange knowledge. The Sector and Regional Network page shows what is happening in regions and sectors to stimulate

a positive and natural learning culture: <https://www.ser.nl/nl/thema/leven-lang-ontwikkelen/actie-agenda>

#### **Box 4: The example of Construction and Infra (Vollandis)**

*Cashing in on knowledge and work experience with an experience certificate.*

'*Learning? Let me work with my hands...*'. This statement is no stranger to employees in the construction and infrastructure sector. But why only build on beautiful projects and not on your own development? That is why a VPL procedure in Construction & Infra was set up.

Many employees are doers and have gained a wealth of knowledge and experience over the years. A full professional training course thus takes a number of years, but fortunately it can be done differently. With a VPL procedure from Vollandis, the employee not only shows what he/she has, but also records this in an experience certificate. Supplemented by training, a diploma can thus be obtained a lot faster.

The VPL route is tailor-made. Participants build a digital portfolio using simple means. The content is assessed and, based on this evidence, the employee receives an experience certificate. Agreements have been made with four VET schools so that candidates can convert their experience certificate into a diploma. The VET school provides the additional training, which is also customised.

Cooperation partners involved are Deltion College, Da Vinci College, ROC van Twente and SOMA College, Bureau Sterk and Vollandis.

Source: <https://www.ser.nl/nl/thema/leven-lang-ontwikkelen/voorbeelden/evc-bouw-infra>

In the labour market route, the *Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC* (NKEVC) ensures the quality of the VPL procedures. Furthermore, the *NKEVC* set up a register for administering people's '*ervaringscertificaat*' and accredits the VPL providers in the labour market. In total, 28 VPL providers are accredited for providing VPL procedures in the labour market route as of January 1, 2023 (Web.ref. NKEVC, 2023).

VPL processes in the labour market route focus on lifelong learning, supported by career guidance of adults in the labour market. Individuals' prior learning outcomes are validated against occupational or qualification standards. A learning programme is designed to support people's employability. Validation tools for identification and documentation include the e-portfolio, portfolio training; for assessment, these include an intake assessment, competency tests, workplace assessments and observations. A VPL procedure may result in the award of an experience certificate that can be used for alignment with professional or occupational standards. In addition, such a "certificate" may also form part of an intake assessment at an educational institution for obtaining exemptions for a qualification. The VPL provider and the educational institution should have cooperative agreements on this in advance. On the Dutch labour market, this validation route supports various perspectives:

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

Training Funds often finance agreements on VPL procedures in the labour market route. Both employees and employers pay a small amount of their incomes to these sector funds, which support educational initiatives for employees (OECD, 2017).

Several key learning points can be identified from experience to date in the labour market route:

- Collaboration between public and private organisations is essential to ensure that work-based learning can be customised following a VPL procedure. Organisations on the labour market have to facilitate and in particular provide guidance in work-based learning, and educational institutes must accept and value the workplace as a valid learning environment.
- Employees need to be as self-reliant and programme independent as possible in the development of their personal development programmes, following a VPL procedure. In this sense, it is up to the individual to make choices concerning the degree of self-determination or external direction within the development programme.
- Organisations/companies must ensure that their formulation of demands is effective. Formulation of demands means that there is clarity concerning (1) the competences present within the organisation and (2) the required competencies within the framework of the organisational aims. A match can be made between (1) and (2), so that (3) the competency demands within the organisation and ultimately (4), an action plan for the validation and development of available competences, as well as those that need to be developed, emerges. Good examples of this integral approach are offered in the sector of municipal personnel, the agricultural sector and the industrial sector.
- Research is needed into the added value of VPL procedures on the labour market, among other things, focused on the recognisable value of non-formal and informal learning outcomes, the economic, financial and social effects and also the relation with other assessment systems, e.g.: in-company, social, etc. Moreover, the supply-driven nature of most VPL processes in the labour market route needs to be analysed in order to find out whether more personalising VPL processes could enhance the labour market route (Duvekot, 2017).

### **VPL processes in Human Resources Development (HRD)**

Based on the reflection of employees in different cases on the VPL process on the labour market within the HRD policy of a company/organisation (Duvekot & Onstenk, 2021) an answer was sought to the questions of how a VPL process fits into the operationalisation of personal development within a labour perspective and what this means for the application of VPL procedures in the HRD of companies and public organisations. The answers found relate to an autonomous VPL process – in line with the 4-stage approach by the European Council - and to VPL procedures as an integrated part of HRD:

- 1) *Awareness and support.* Awareness of the value of a validation approach aimed at the employee depends on the quality of the dialogue on (lifelong) learning among all actors involved. Such consensus can be initiated by each of the actors. Employers especially have the possibilities to integrate VPL processes in their HRD. The effectiveness of VPL procedures will be enhanced if good guidance of employees is organised when working on their documentation. Authorities can become aware of and support the realisation of the process, for example through legislation and regulations (including financial regulations) to stimulate VPL procedures directly or indirectly in HRD.
- 2) *Breadth and equivalence of competence/learning outcomes.* Competences or learning outcomes, recorded in personal learning experiences, promote the accessibility and innovation of the learning and work systems. The equivalence of personal formal, non-formal and informal learning [the personal standard] can be established in comparison to formal standards and normative frameworks of job and qualifications systems when all standards are expressed in terms of competences or learning outcomes.
- 3) *Open dialogue.* Listening to each other in the dialogue between actors is essential for creating an effective balance between learning objectives, learning needs and learning opportunities. It means having the time and space to determine the personal



- contribution to the VPL process. The personal contribution is both retrospective and forward-looking: 'Where do I come from and where do I go'. In such an open dialogue, each actor bears his own responsibility.
- 4) *Assessment (as learning)*. There are four main types of assessment: self-assessment, assessment of learning, assessment for learning and assessment as learning. In particular, the first form can be used by the worker; the other three forms can be integrated into the policies of both the company and the training provider.
  - 5) *Ownership of learning*. When an employee maps and documents his own learning experiences, this means that this employee creates opportunities to help design his personal development process.
  - 6) *Anchoring VPL processes*. VPL processes can be anchored in the self-management of competencies of employees, the HRD of the company/organisation and the training offer.

### 3.4 Validation and the third sector

Validation in the third sector is fragmented in the Netherlands. Many procedures are active in various third sector organisations (umbrella term for the voluntary sector, non-governmental organisations, non-profit organisations). In general, these initiatives are embedded in the labour market route with a special focus on linkage with the education route. Validation occurs both for internal purposes – making sure a volunteer is up to the tasks given – as well as for external purposes – proving that the organisation works with competent volunteers. In both approaches the impact of validation is clear for the stakeholders involved: volunteers getting insight in their competences and the organisation being able to manage the internal function-system effectively.

At the national level, Europass Nederland offers 'the Europass certificate for volunteers'. This certificate for volunteers gives a clear and objective description of the activities of the volunteer: the context, type of activities, specific skills and competences, duration, etc. Because the experience and competences in the completion of the document are specifically stated and discussed in collaboration with a supervisor, a volunteer is not only able to present what experience she or he has gained during the volunteer work, but she or he also becomes aware of their own qualities. Also, for the volunteer organisations it can be important that it issues 'a Europass certificate for volunteers'. With this it shows that it takes volunteering seriously and invests in the careers of the volunteers. Volunteers may find it attractive to work for this organisation because they receive a Europass document. This allows the volunteer to demonstrate to a possible future employer or other volunteer organization what he or she has learned and what experience has been gained during the period of volunteering<sup>2</sup>.

EDOS Foundation<sup>3</sup> is researching the ways to make volunteers and volunteer organisations aware of the added value of non-formal and informal learning, and how to get it validated. In several European projects the foundation has developed easy-to-use tools and methods for the individual volunteer and for the volunteer organisation, like portfolio-tools, assessment-instruments, and professionalisation-courses. EDOS initiates training courses, workshops, projects and other educational activities to stimulate and facilitate the personal and professional development of adults and youngsters who are professionally or voluntary active in the field of adult education, youth work and welfare work (Bremer & Peeters, pp. 279-285, in: Duvekot, et al, 2020).

A trend in validating volunteering work is a focus on raising awareness of one's potential and visualising this potential in a group-process in which the individual learners act as peers for each other. Such group-trainings are used for identifying skills and life experiences on

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2 <https://www.europass.nl/producten/vrijwilligers/>

3 <http://www.edosfoundation.com>

Also see: <https://www.nov.nl/koers+mee/programmas/proqupgradingvalidation/default.aspx>

the one hand and empowering target groups on the other hand. The first is focused on documenting and assessing actual personal learning experiences, while the latter is focused on identifying and documenting the revealed qualities one already has but wasn't so much aware of. The first is represented for instance by the MDT-programme for youth, the latter on target group-oriented projects like PEPPY for youth and CAMPLUS for migrants and refugees.

In volunteering a new approach was presented in 2018 by the government: Social Service Time (*Maatschappelijke Diensttijd – MDT*) aims to offer all young people the opportunity to discover their talents, do something for others and meet new people through an MDT project.<sup>4</sup> This strengthens not only the young people, but also society as a whole. MDT is based on the vision that a broad, social orientation for young people and young adults contributes to the formation of critical and engaged citizens. MDT is fundamentally about citizenship and personal development. Through MDT, young people build self-confidence, know better what they want and acquire important (study and work) skills. In the long run, this leads to a stronger and connected society. The mission of MDT is therefore to offer all young people aged 14-27 in the Netherlands the opportunity to do an MDT in their own environment that suits their life phase and interests. For example, young people can organise sports activities, give language lessons to newcomers or work at a company or care institution. An MDT pathway lasts a minimum of 80 hours for a maximum of six months.

In 2021, further steps were taken towards the sustainable setting up of the infrastructure with the aim of creating a nationwide, working and learning MDT network in which there is supply for every young person aged between 14 and 27. This network is stable and growing steadily from its founding principles, especially the pursuit of shared learning. This is how MDT continues to develop and be open to what is going on in society to continue to provide the quality that makes MDT valuable. Since October 2018, a total of 38,887 young people has so far participated in a regular MDT programme (Onderzoek, 2021). The validation process in MDT projects follows the four stages (as outlined in the 2012 EU Council Recommendation on VNFIL) in which young people first identify their skills and reflect on their experiences, then document these experiences and receive a form of validation through a certificate or formal proof of taking part in an MDT programme.

Another approach in volunteering focuses on youth. To support possibilities for permanent progressive autonomy and to value the skills potential among young people, the European PEPPY project<sup>5</sup> (*Promote education, participation and projects for young people*) is combining research action and direct support for the implementation of territorial initiatives for local youth. The PEPPY project supports young people's desire for young people's creative freedom to (1) encourage and support their entrepreneurial skills and uncover their potential for acquiring skills and autonomy, and to (2) initiate a pedagogical dynamic to make the educational process more attuned to guiding each young person's personalised learning. The main target group is young people aged between 18 and 25, most of whom have left the formal education system (NEET, without qualifications, but also trainees in vocational training, young people enrolled in labour support offices or in a vocational training course to prevent them from dropping out). PEPPY aims at assisting them in revealing their skills and getting more tailored learning attuned to their social engagement, and therewith be recognized for their own identity and values. In view of the desired impact on pedagogical practices and dynamics, PEPPY also targets youth workers, pedagogical staff, teachers, professors or trainers, and any other educational actor potentially able to accompany young people both in their socialisation and in the determination of their ambitions.

The CAMPLUS-project follows the same approach as the PEPPY project but focuses on empowering migrants and refugees. In this project the concept of *Personal Resources Management (PRM)* is introduced as a methodology aimed at empowering people and

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4 <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/maatschappelijke-diensttijd>

5 <https://www.peppy-project.eu/en/home/>

activating and facilitating their ability to learn. PRM for migrants and refugees builds further on the recognition and validation of one's prior learning experiences. Once one's already existing value – acquired through prior formal, informal and non-formal learning experiences – has been articulated and linked to personal potential, then a person can take career steps that fit the personal profile and are provided in a personal action plan. This increases the chances of a successful career. The manual (Duvekot, Beek van and Schuur, 2022) aims to support both migrants as well as trainers, guiders and assessors in getting grip on their PRM by and to reflect on their actions in practice and the choices they face in their practice and life by:

- supporting migrants in articulating their talents based on their prior learning experiences, in order to give them a real chance of career development in their new country.
- equipping the trainer to learn their trainees how to reflect and create (new) perspectives for their career and enjoyability.
- Providing a guide for guiders and assessors to support and value/assess trainees in their PRM.

This manual is designed especially for volunteers working in refugee camps and in local voluntary activities for migrants. In this way, the manual provides insight into the process of learning to reflect on one's activities and learning experiences, and also on those of others to learn from. Different sets of exercises are presented to support migrants, trainers, guiders and assessors in such learning and capacitating.

## 4 Links to credentials and qualifications

With the change of focus to quality assurance in 2006, and the transition from policy to practical processes since 2016, the Dutch government stimulated and funded the development of a national infrastructure for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. VLW broadened the perspective of capitalising on prior learning outcomes for more purposes than just reaching out to qualification standards but also to sector standards, function profiles, career paths and personal development goals. The broader aim was to stimulate lifelong learning [or lifelong development as promoted in the Netherlands] and to enlarge the accessibility and flexibility of formal and non-formal education for adults. In this process the NLQF also plays an important role by linking formal and non-formal learning outcomes in the levels of the Dutch Qualification Framework, therewith strengthening the value and transparency of occupational standards.

The aim of the dual system since 2016 was and still is to boost adult learning in combination with work, volunteering, and citizenship activities, without focusing specifically on one or more key skills, but rather on programmes combining work and study that lead to a qualification and/or better opportunities in the job market. The *Ervaringscertificaat* is used – amongst other VPL-instruments – to assess and recognise prior learning competences. The broadening of the pathways of VPL since 2016 is about widening the perspectives of what VPL brings to Dutch citizens: qualification, employability, personal development.

In this widening process, next to the *'Ervaringscertificaat'*, in 2017 the *'vakbekwaamheidsbewijs'* was introduced in the labour market route (Register ervaringscertificaten, 2017). The latter is a Certificate of Professional Competence that is linked to a Certificate of Experience prepared by an approved VPL provider based on an occupational or industry standard. This *'vakbekwaamheidsbewijs'* aims at articulating the personal value of an employee on the labour market in the occupation itself and links this value to other available occupations. Both certificates only hold value within the labour market route.

**Box 5: Validation in youth assistance and youth protection. An example of a Certificate of Professional Competence ('Vakbekwaamheidsbewijs')**

Professionals in youth assistance and youth protection are only allowed to perform certain activities if they are registered with the Youth Quality Register Foundation (SKJ). If they do not meet the registration requirements, the VPL pathway 'hbo youth and family professional' offers a solution.

#### *Why has this VPL procedure been developed?*

The Youth Act includes the so-called responsible action standard. This occupational standard obliges providers of youth aid and youth protection to use a professional who is registered with the Youth Quality Register (SKJ) for certain activities. Professionals who do not meet the registration requirements can go through a VPL procedure that assesses to what extent someone has the competences needed to do work that requires the deployment of a registered youth and family professional. Based on the competency profile 'hbo youth and family professional', an occupational standard has therefore been developed.

#### *For whom has this VPL procedure been developed?*

This VPL procedure has been specially developed for professionals working in youth aid and youth protection (GGZ, Social Work, Disability Care, Youth Care and Youth Health Care) who:

- have been working in a higher professional position for at least 1 year.
- are responsible for the tasks which, according to the responsible working standard, must be performed by a registered professional.
- do not meet the registration requirements for the chamber Youth and Family Professionals in the SKJ. For example, because they have a VET diploma or have not completed their hbo or wo education or because their current diploma does not give them access to the SKJ register.

#### *What is the standard 'Skilled college youth and family professional'?*

The standard for Professional competent higher professional in youth and family is derived from the competence profile 'higher professional in youth and family'. The standard consists of six areas of expertise:

1. Supporting directing.
2. Collaborating with the youth and family.
3. Strengthening the network.
4. Interdisciplinary cooperation with and around the youth and his system.
5. Taking (partial and temporary) control of the young person and his family.
6. Acting ethically and with integrity.

Each area of expertise consists of a number of indicators that indicate which behaviours match them.

#### *How does the VPL procedure work?*

During this VPL procedure, the candidate collects evidence from his/her own work experience for all areas of expertise: the so-called professional products. This evidence gives a picture of professional conduct in the relevant area of expertise of the VPL standard Skilled Bachelor Youth and Family Professional.

#### *Result*

Upon completion of the VPL process, the candidate receives an experience certificate describing how he/she as a professional relates to the standard. Once the candidate has met the competency requirements, namely mastering 80% of the indicators for each area of expertise, the certificate of experience is converted into an official document: **the certificate of professional competence "Skilled youth and family professional"**. With this certificate, a person can (re)register in the chamber Youth and Family Professionals of the SKJ.

Source: <https://www.jeuqdzorg-werkt.nl/werknemers/alles-over-de-evc-procedure-hbo-jeugd-en-gezinsprofessional>

## **The National Framework for Qualifications**

An intermediary function between formal learning routes and non-formal learning routes is filled by the Dutch Qualification Framework (NLQF) through the National Coordination Point NLQF (NCP-NLQF). The NLQF is related to the European Qualifications Frameworks (EQF) and enables mobility on the European labour market. Private educators can link their qualifications to NLQF levels since 2012. Since 2016, a gradual rise in the number of qualifications referred to the NLQF has been registered (Cedefop, 2018). The NLQF aims

to facilitate learning and labour market mobility by providing an insight into the levels of qualifications recorded by the NCP-NLQF in the NCP's national register of classified and graded non-formal learning programmes. The NLQF provides transparency in that it facilitates a comparison of qualification levels at national and European level and thus facilitating labour market mobility. The NLQF doesn't concern VLW and/or VPL-procedures.

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

All government-regulated qualifications (the qualifications of the Ministries of Education Culture and Sciences; Economic Affairs; Food and Natural and Living Environment) in the National Coordination Point (NCP) have had an NLQF-level since 2011. All other qualifications are first graded, and their level determined by the NCP and then recorded in the Register. For sectoral organisations, it is possible to have their standards graded and classified on one of the NLQF levels. The result of this can be that a sector-based standard that is used for learning or career advice in the labour market route can be registered on a specific NLQF level.

While progress has been slow in the first years, 1085 qualifications have been included in the framework to date:

<b>NLQF (2012-2023): qualifications levelled and included in the framework</b>		
<b>Level</b>	<b>Formal qualification</b>	<b>Number of non-formal/regulated qualifications levelled</b>
1	VET-level 1	34
2	VET-level 2	262
3	VET-level 3	323
4	VET-level 4	385
5	Associate degree	17
6	Bachelor's degree	61
7	Master's degree	3
8	Doctorate, designer, medical specialist	0
<b>Total</b>		<b>1085</b>

Source: [https://database.nlqf.nl/search?open=nlqf\\_level\\_id&open=eqf\\_level\\_id&start=0](https://database.nlqf.nl/search?open=nlqf_level_id&open=eqf_level_id&start=0)

## **Credentials**

A credential in the Netherlands is a documented statement issued by an educational organisation to individuals following a learning experience. There are different forms of credentials. Relating learning experiences and valuing them with some form of a credential is currently done at three levels in the Netherlands: European, VET, and higher education.



In all cases, personal learning experiences stated in credentials can later serve to obtain a qualification or for career progression. Only through Europass are employers also involved in valuing and credentialing someone's learning experiences. In VET and higher education, credentials relate to the components of formal education or internships completed by individuals or to their years of practical experience.

Credentials do not relate to validation arrangements, other than that within credential learning pathways, assessments can also be used in which previously acquired competences contribute to the assessment.

Europass NL offers digital credentials. As a digital file, these credentials can contain a wide range of valuable information that can help employers and other institutions recognise and understand the credential. Europass digital credentials have a host of advantages over paper certificates: they can alleviate administrative pressure for students, graduates, education and training providers and companies. Europass digital credentials can also reduce the impact of credential fraud and contribute to paperless workflows. Europass digital credentials can be verified instantly; recipients can automatically verify information such as the identity of the issuing service or the quality assurance of a qualification. Europass digital credentials are signed by means of an e-Seal, which means they enjoy a legal presumption of authenticity throughout the EU and are equivalent to the paper version containing the same information. Microcredentialing - offering education in smaller units that are individually certified - encourages flexibility in education and gives recognisable value to institutions' Lifelong Development offerings.<sup>6</sup>

VET schools (MBO) offer more and more scope for credentialing. Educational institutions can, next to awarding full qualifications, also issue an MBO certificate to students who leave an MBO programme without a diploma, or an MBO declaration which may include a practical certificate. An MBO certificate is issued after completion of part of the programme for which a certificate has been established. The examination committee awards the certificate after it has determined that the student has met all the certificate's requirements. Students may agree with the educational institution to take part in the certification programme for which MBO certificates have been established. An MBO certificate is registered in the diploma register of the national Education Executive Agency (DUO).<sup>7</sup>

VET schools (MBO) introduced also de possibility to offer an MBO declaration ('MBO-verklaring'). The examination committee is obliged to issue the MBO declaration to all students who are no longer enrolled at an institution, are younger than 23 and have not yet obtained a starting qualification. In the eyes of the Dutch government, a starting qualification is the minimum level of education required to have a serious chance of obtaining sustainable skilled employment in the Netherlands. This level is set at NLQF level 2.

In higher education, 34 higher education institutions - including 12 universities and 22 universities of applied sciences - are participating in a national microcredentials pilot-project, organised by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Applied Sciences of the Netherlands since October 2021.<sup>8</sup> The microcredential is treated in this pilot-project as a reliable certificate that allows professionals to demonstrate their knowledge and skills after successful completion of a unit of study. In other words, the microcredential gives an independent value to a smaller unit of study (in the pilot, this involves a size between 3 and 30 EC). The microcredential stands for accreditation-worthy education and adds a quality seal: the (paying) participant/employer can be confident that the course is designed in such a way that learning outcomes are achieved. The achievement of these learning outcomes is traceable and verifiable. However, a microcredential is not just about the end result. The entire process, including the learning activities and associated assessment of learning outcomes, gives value to a microcredential, which is recognised within and outside

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6 <https://europa.eu/europass/nl/what-are-digital-credentials>

7 <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/ronl-90f15c5d-6c09-4932-8485-cfeb9ca6c6d6/pdf>

8 <https://www.versnellingsplan.nl/Kennisbank/pilot-microcredentials/>

educational institutions. In addition, there is national registration of who has achieved which microcredential.

## 5 Standards

As stated before, validation arrangements encompass VLW in the education route and VPL-procedures on the labour market. Both forms of validation can be used to assess and recognise the competences (both vocational and general) of a candidate in relation to the standards (finishing levels) of an internal or sector standard (branch or sector qualification), MBO (VET qualification), HBO (HE qualification in universities of applied science) and WO (HE qualification in academic universities).

As mentioned, all government-regulated qualifications are incorporated in the NLQF. Other qualifications can be incorporated as well but must meet criteria for quality of the programme (content and assessment model) and the labour market relevance.

Occupational standards in labour market sectors and VET and HE are offered through occupational standards and translated into competences and learning outcomes. One can also be validated via a VPL procedure to reach out to such a standard.

In some sectors VPL procedures may be part of the human resources management (HRM) approach. The focus lies on sustainable employability and mobility of the workforce. Also, linkage of the *Ervaringscertificaat* with occupational standards is strengthened by awarding a certificate of vocational skills – ‘*vakbekwaamheidsbewijs*’ next to the *ervaringscertificaat* (Register ervaringscertificaten, 2017). This can lead to labour market results in terms of a new career opportunity, a career-upgrade or a financial reward.

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

Organisations and institutions involved in validation arrangements differ from the route in which validation is managed.

In the education route the main organisations dealing with validation arrangements are VET-schools and universities when it comes to integrating validation into the assessment-structure of their learning trajectories. Validation and its quality assurance is part of regular external quality assurance in education by the national education inspection (for VET) and the national accreditation organisation NVAO (for HE).

In the labour market route, an organisation can become a VPL provider in the labour market route, as long as they operate according to the VPL quality code and their VPL process has been accredited by an independent accrediting organisation. The quality code for VPL aims to achieve more transparency and comparability of VPL procedures. The evaluation is carried out every 18 months and for every sectoral standard covered by a VPL provider (for example finance or logistics). VPL providers that are accredited are registered in the National Register for accredited VPL procedures within a specific domain/sector. For providers in the labour market route the quality code entails:

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

When registered in the Quality Code for VPL (also see chapter 10), an organisation may offer VPL procedures that can lead to an *Ervaringscertificaat*. Evaluations are conducted regularly. The results are incorporated into improvement actions.

Since the formal VPL-procedure is taking place independently from the awarding of exemptions or full qualifications, both public and private organisations can be registered as an official VPL provider or supplier, operating in the labour market route.

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

In the labour market route, according to the, in 2021 updated 3.0 version, Quality Code for VPL, only certified professionals can be VPL assessors, guides and advisors. Their competences must be documented and, in most cases, also certified. In the labour market route, there are function profiles available for accredited VPL providers to fill in for their VPL staff. (NKC, 2022)

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

#### ■ Government

In the dual approach, the responsibilities of the Ministry of Education are in the education route. The government aims to promote and facilitate flexible and customised education programmes for adult workers and job seekers to acquire national qualifications, thus encouraging lifelong learning. The quality of validation in the education route is an integral part of the regular quality assurance process in education, which eliminates the need for a separate quality assurance assessment of VPL providers within the education route.

#### ■ The Dutch Inspectorate of Education & NVAO

The Dutch Inspectorate of Education is responsible for inspecting and evaluating schools and educational institutions. When embedded VPL is used in exam processes, the Inspectorate ensures that the quality of these processes is maintained. In higher education, the Inspectorate also accredits assessment centres within educational institutions that assess and validate formal, non-formal, and informal learning outcomes to determine eligibility for certain programmes<sup>9</sup>. Both public and private vocational and higher education institutions can integrate VPL into their internal quality assurance systems and include it in the regular accreditation or auditing of qualifications by either the national education inspection for vocational education or the national accreditation organization, NVAO, for higher education.

#### ■ Social partners

The social partners in the Netherlands are responsible for the quality of distribution of VPL services in the labour market route. Training of employees is the primary responsibility of the social partners. This therefore also affects the introduction of VPL-systems for employees and jobseekers (Eurydice, Cedefop, ETF, 2003).

The social partners and the government, as the so-called 'covenant partners', together took responsibility for promoting and maintaining a 'high quality' national system of VPL up to 2023. In consultation with the social partners, the government decided not to follow up on the VPL covenant that expired at the end of 2022, as VPL procedures are eligible for reimbursement through STAP and serve as an instrument within the government's policy to promote skills validation. (MSZW, 2022a).

Social partners stimulate the use of VPL through collective labour agreements. Employees have the right to VPL in certain collective labour agreements. In collective labour agreements the social partners in specific sectors also agree that Training and Development funds can be used for the validation of employees' personal competences. Sometimes they even agree on using the fund for giving learning vouchers to the employees. The Training and Development fund provides the portfolio models, internal assessors and guidance. Since the end of the 1990s, many sectors (e.g. construction manufacturing, catering, education, healthcare), have set up initiatives regarding VPL at

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<sup>9</sup> <https://english.onderwijsinspectie.nl/inspection/other-tasks-of-the-dutch-inspectorate-of-education>



their (sectoral) level. In most cases social partners, sector organisations and accredited VPL suppliers are involved in setting up VPL procedures.

For the labour market route the Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC (Staatscourant, 2016) ensures the quality of VPL procedures and promotes the social benefits of the '*ervaringscertificaat*'. The centre accredits VPL providers and maintains a register for the administration of the '*ervaringscertificaat*' that learners have obtained.

## 7 Outreach, awareness raising, provision of information, advice and guidance

The integrated approach pursued in the Netherlands when it comes to outreach, information provision and guidance is aimed at (1) making people aware of the value of their learning experiences for pursuing further/new learning and career opportunities, (2) guidance and counselling aimed at making 'people's voices' heard, and (3) professionalising experts (assessors, advisers, supervisors) in valuing and learning from people's learning experiences as holistically as possible.

### 7.1 Outreach and awareness-raising

Raising awareness of the necessity and opportunities of lifelong learning for individuals in any given context is at the heart of the process of VLW. Without this, learning will remain school- or company-led and cannot effectively be based on individuals' motivations and ambitions. Where the government is responsible for raising awareness of the merits of VLW in the education route, the social partners have this responsibility for the labour market route. They work together as covenant partners in this. In this covenant – which is being reviewed two-yearly – the commitment of the stakeholders to raising awareness, quality-assurance and linkage of the two routes are agreed upon.

Above all, individuals must become self-aware of their own competencies, the value they place on these competencies, and how others may perceive their competencies in different contexts and situations. The ability to continuously improve and adapt one's competencies in a customized manner is essential to gaining a deeper understanding of their worth and relevance.

VLW, or validation processes that are bottom-up, are primarily used to motivate individuals to reflect on their development so far and determine what their next step should be. This approach is evident in portfolio-driven group trainings. In the MBOin2030 ministerial programme for the VET sector, outreach and raising awareness are crucial activities. These are mainly achieved through an integral communication strategy involving the formation of an open network via LinkedIn, a website for information and exchange, and live meetings. MOOCs and challenges (innovative projects) are launched to stimulate validation applications and strengthen connections between learners, education, and the labour market.

In higher education teacher training programmes, a different approach is being promoted due to shortages in the teaching profession. Teacher education institutions are strengthening opportunities for people with relevant work experience to enter the profession by providing information about the required competencies and opportunities that VLW provides to build on relevant learning experiences. Outreach and raising awareness are crucial to this approach.

For organisations in the labour market, it is vital to understand that investing in their employees means investing in the organisation's goals. This awareness should lead to setting specific targets for investing in individuals and providing support for their human resource development.

1. Providing information on VPL mainly occurs at the 'grassroots' level of learning and working processes where validation arrangements comes to fruition for workers, jobseekers, volunteers, and private individuals. In practice, awareness-raising activities are targeted at specific groups such as minorities, jobseekers, youth-groups, and special needs groups.
2. The digital skills passport is an increasingly popular tool in the labour market for reaching out and raising awareness of the potential value of an individual's competencies. Two goals are central in promoting the skills passport: identifying aspects that ease labour market transitions for employees and identifying aspects that employers believe are decisive in selecting new employees. The passport provides insight into required education and training and contributes to discovering potential talent on the labour market.

## 7.2 Information, advice and guidance for validation arrangements

Apart from the focus on summative outcomes of validation procedures, formative outcomes are also promoted. Both forms of outcomes of validation arrangements in the education and the labour market routes are used to inform, advise and guide learners who want or need a validation to obtain a qualification, to improve their employability or for their personal development. This dual focus is paramount to the work of counsellors, guides and assessors in validation processes. Much attention is given to training these validation professionals to answer questions such as 'what is a valuable learning experience?', 'how to proof a valuable learning experience?', 'how to reflect on a learning outcome?', 'how to make a specific level of performance visible?', etc. Next to supporting learners in building their portfolio, other activities entail providing guidance on the assessment process. Services also support assessors in provided formative advice on people's further learning options after the validation process.

Accredited VPL providers in the labour market route as well as guides and assessors the validation provision in the education route have the obligation to offer good information and advice on why, how and when to enter a validation-procedure. In practice, information, advice and guidance concerning validation arrangements is distributed on different levels:

- macro-level – distributed by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, and the social partners.
- meso-level – distributed by the sector partners (employers and trade unions).
- micro level of organisations – distributed by HR departments and career-guidance bureaus, by registered VPL providers, and by schools/universities offering validation arrangements.

In addition, a regional structure has been set up with *Leer Werk Loketten*<sup>10</sup> across the country. Everyone – jobseeker, employee and employer – can visit such a centre and receive free advice on learning and working opportunities. These centres are a link between training providers and the labour market. Amongst other institutions, these centres facilitate cooperation between VPL providers, schools (VET and HE) and employees and/or employers, to apply VPL processes as a career guidance tool.

Another example is the training of guides for validation processes and of assessors in which the focus is on developing the information and counselling skills of these professionals. This kind of training takes place using various approaches, in the experimentation in higher education for flexible learning, higher education's teacher training programmes, the

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<sup>10</sup> A '*leer werk loket*' is a central place where all information can be found in the region on careers, training and combining learning and work.

ministerial project of MBOin2030, the experiments with skills passports on sector levels, etc.

## 8 Validation practitioners

### 8.1 Profile of validation practitioners

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

- Guides for intakes: the professionals in recognising formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences who can advise individuals on a possible VPL procedure once they have chosen to take part in a career-path or learning programme.
- Assessors: the professionals who assess individuals when they want to apply validation arrangements for summative purposes and formative advice.
- Portfolio-guides and -advisors: the professionals who help raise awareness of one's personal, potential value/talents, help people fill in their portfolio and set learning objectives.
- Developers/advisors: the professionals who develop validation arrangements and VPL procedures based on sector and national standards; they also advise on this.
- Teacher-trainers: the professionals who train the intakers, assessors, guides and advisors.

#### Box 6a: The intaker in teacher-training

Intakers in teacher training in higher education are able to question the learner in an intake interview, recognise (in)formal learning experiences and advise about validation arrangements and inform about the follow-up trajectory.

Intakers are professionalised/trained in recognising (in)formal learning experiences and can advise the learner on a possible validation arrangement and meet the profile below.

Intakers advise which learning experiences and previously acquired qualifications lead to:

- Exemptions based on formal learning experiences.
- Exemptions based on non-formal and informal learning experiences.
- Exemptions based on subject matter (knowledge).

An intaker has/is:

- relevant and broad expertise and practical experience in the field of the learning opportunities or standards (s)he represents.
- very good knowledge of the career/curriculum/learning routes/customisation options and the competence requirements translated to a personal option (e.g. function/programme profile).
- has extensive experience in supervising learners, in the sense that (s)he has experience as 'a listener to the voice of the learner'.
- customer-oriented and interested in the personal/professional development of the learner.
- works efficiently, accurately and keeps appointments.
- communicates in an accessible and convincing words and manner, both orally and in writing.
- learning-oriented: is willing to invest in her/himself.

Source : Landelijke Werkgroep EVC- en vrijstellingenbeleid Lerarenopleidingen (2023). *Handreiking Brede Intake*. Tien voor de Leraar, Den Haag.

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

understand the integral process of validation. First and foremost, they all have to be convinced of the ability of learners for (further) personal development in the collective context of 'the learning society'.

### Box 6b. The assessor in teacher-training

The Institute Archimedes for teacher training of Utrecht University of Applied Sciences designed assessor-profiles on three levels in order to be able to deal with (1) the complexity of validating people's learning experiences and achievements in domains of learning, working and living, (2) inclusiveness of formal, non-formal and informal learning and (3) quality-management of learning-independent learning trajectories. The levels are indicated in the spheres of knowledge, action-orientation and autonomy, and responsibility:

Basic assessor (B):

Knowledge level is orienting and observing, has (and further develops) basic knowledge and skills and works mainly routinely.

Action orientation is contributing to the assessment process (assisting, actively cooperating, acting). Responsible for the own range of duties within established procedures.

Expert Assessor (E):

Knowledge level is analytical: applies knowledge and works with guidelines and procedures in complex situations.

Action orientation is independent and initiating within the assessment process (acting, executing, designing, initiative).

Works responsibly and result-oriented, initiates and develops assessment trajectories.

Development Assessor (O):

Knowledge level is in-depth (holistic, professionally planning and (self) evaluating).

Action orientation is autonomous and professionally operating within the assessment process (defining a position, considering alternatives both individually and in consultation with others).

Works proactively at all levels of the assessment process, initiates, implements and evaluates assessment trajectories.

Source: BA&V, 2018

## 8.2 Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

The training of validation practitioners is ensured by accredited VPL providers in the labour market route and by (public and private) training-institutes within VET-schools (ROC's; MBO) and HE (HBO) in the education route.

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

- understand key concepts and benefits of validation arrangements.
- review and analyse models of recognition and accreditation of prior learning.
- analyse and develop the skills, knowledge and processes required to support validation practices.
- understand and apply VLW and/or VPL processes.
- reflect on the impact of VLW on their professional learning, practice and their educational setting.
- understand the organisation, management and marketing of validation arrangements.

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

- **Reviewing:** the assessor/adviser is able to adequately provide an assessment of the competences of the participant, using a number of common competency-based assessment forms, such as the portfolio, the criterion-based interview and practical

simulations. They can apply these assessment forms integrally within a validation procedure. The assessor/adviser is able to perform an assessment on the basis of a standard (competency-profile), to assess the provided evidence of the candidate on the basis of the prevailing assessment-criteria and to assess answers of a participant using the standard.

- **Observing:** the assessor/adviser is able to adequately observe the participant and to link an assessment-report to this observation, in relation to the standard that was used as a basis for the assessment.
- **Interviewing:** the assessor/adviser is able, by using specific questions and interview techniques in an assessment-situation, to make the competences of the participant transparent and to compare these competences in the interview with the standard. The assessor/adviser asks questions to investigate the value of personal experiences (competences, knowledge and skills).
- **Providing feedback:** the assessor/adviser is able to provide feedback to the participant in a constructive and motivating way and to indicate the results of the assessment, customized for the purposes of the participant. The assessor/adviser can explain and substantiate the decisions based on the assessment and indicate at which points the participant is competent. (Note: only if this is part of the procedure however it may also be done by the adviser).
- **Written communication:** the assessor/adviser is able to write a clear, detailed and structured assessment report. The assessor/adviser describes the competences of the participant that are valid for the used standard. Personal characteristics are only added when applicable.
- **(additional) Technical competence:** (depending on a national learning culture, this competence can be added): the assessor/adviser is technically competent and must have sufficient experience and qualifications in the appropriate discipline (professionally). The assessor can prove that they have sufficient technical skills and is willing to keep abreast of developments in the sector. The technical level of the assessor must be at least as high as that of the participant. The assessor/adviser is familiar with the assessment process and objectives, the assessment tools and the methodology. The assessor/adviser is familiar with the sector or company standards (job descriptions, qualification profiles) and has knowledge of the labour market and vocational education programmes for the sake of the assessment.

### 8.3 Qualification and experience

In line with the necessity of the quality assurance of validation in both the education and the labour market route, the validation practitioners play a very important role in validation process. Their certification is grounded in the organisation from which they act in linking people's learning experiences and needs to organisation's skills needs and functional contexts. It is especially mandatory for assessors in both routes to have a training with certification, regularly perform assessments and take part in calibrating sessions with colleagues in which the outcomes of assessments are reviewed.

The qualification requirements for validation professionals have been split up according to the dual route for validation in the Netherlands.

In the education route, there is no formal national standard for the various validation functions available, nor a standard or qualification for assessors in the Netherlands. Every educational institute can organise the validation process within its own quality standards for examination. The qualification requirements of intakers, assessors, guides and teacher/trainers are part of the institute's responsibility to offer accredited learning programmes for formal learning. These requirements form part of the overall responsibility of designing, implementing and evaluating education programmes for which they are accredited. This entails that performing tasks in the validation-process is part of an

institute's internal professionalisation programme. In practice, the institute's exam committees – responsible for awarding the qualifications – check that validation is executed with trained and certified staff, according to internal quality requirements for validation. Validation and its quality assurance is also part of regular external quality assurance in education by the national education inspection (for VET) and the national accreditation organisation NVAO (for HE).

In the labour market route, according to the, in 2021 updated 3.0 version, Quality Code for VPL, only certified professionals can be assessors, guides and advisors. Their competences must be documented and, in most cases, also certified. In the labour market route, there are function profiles available for accredited VPL providers to fill in for their staff (NKC, 2022). The 28 accredited VPL providers in the labour market route are committed through their accreditation to safeguard that all staff deployed in VPL procedures has:

- a. A level of education at least one level higher than the standard(s) they assess, or demonstrable seniority combined with broad experience and knowledge of the standard and the field of work.
- b. Sufficient relevant professional knowledge for the domain/context/standards they work for.
- c. Sufficiently relevant practical experience.
- d. Sufficient knowledge of current developments within the discipline, sector or the profession.
- e. Sufficient knowledge and understanding of the criteria that apply to sound evidence.
- f. Sufficient skill in the use of the applied forms of assessment and the associated and applicable tools.
- g. Knowledge of the writing guide for Experience Certificates.
- h. The ability to convert findings effectively, both orally within the procedure and in writing into an easily readable and transferable experience certificate.

The VPL providers actively facilitate and monitor the quality of the VPL staff to be deployed. This includes, for example, active participation in consultations, conducting supervision, facilitating intervision, attendance at practical assessments and/or assessing/calibrating experience certificates.

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

The main observation is that there actually no formal professional requirements for professionals exists on a national level for both validation routes. All provision on validation arrangements is quality-guaranteed by the providers themselves by means of either applying the VPL-code (labour market route) or being quality-assured by the exam committees (education route). Implicitly, there is broad agreement on the minimum quality requirements that can be set the expertise of staff in terms of impartiality, listening, speaking, reading and writing skills and case expertise.



## 9 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

### 9.1 Funding and costs

The government has supported and is supporting the utilisation of VPL in various ways. Sector and industry organisations also support(ed) the use of VPL. VPL is financed in different ways by different stakeholders, depending on the context in which VPL is applied: in the education route or in the labour market route:

- Regional Learning Centers [*Leer Werk Loketten*] are regional partnerships of education institutions, entrepreneurs and government bodies (municipalities and UWV) and fulfil an advisory function for the deployment of VPL among other things. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW) subsidises the learning labour offices with a structural state contribution of €4.5 million per year (w.e.f. €1 million for the national programme team and €3.5 million for the labour market regions).
- From 1 January 2007, there were tax breaks for employers investing in a VPL procedure. An employer who paid the costs of a VPL procedure for an employee was entitled to a tax reduction per VPL procedure. The participant who paid the costs of a VPL procedure himself could deduct those costs as educational expenses in the income tax return. This tax break has been followed up since 2022 by the STAP-facility.
- The STAP-facility offers budgets for workers and jobseekers to encourage training, including VPL procedures since 2022. Within STAP a separate scheme for a VPL procedure has been established, whereby a subsidy can be granted to accredited VPL providers for carrying out a VPL procedure. The personalised STAP budget is maximised at €1,000 (incl. VAT).

This STAP-facility is however already ending in 2023. The government is looking for new ways to continue encouraging learning and development from 2024. For 2016-2024, universities of applied sciences receive subsidies for developing and working with learning outcomes and their learning pathway-independent validation with the Flexible Higher Education for Adults and Learning Outcomes Experiment Scheme. It has already been announced that this scheme will not be extended beyond the end of the experiment in 2024 (Web.Ref. DUO, 2023).

- For jobseekers and dismissals, there is the possibility of UWV reimbursing all or part of the costs of a VPL procedure for employees an employer has to part with.
- Many sector and industry organisations have schemes for training and more specifically for VPL processes. The website of the NKEVC contains an overview. For example, WijTechniek<sup>11</sup> (fund for the technical installation sector) offers a subsidy of up to €1,400 for a validation route. The validation must be carried out by an accredited VPL provider. Other sector funds offer subsidies ranging between €700 and €1,400.
- From 2019, the temporary Subsidy Scheme Flexible Vocational Education in the lifelong learning pathway offers a subsidy to partnerships of funded and non-funded VET schools for the purpose of developing flexible training routes for adults. The scheme also encourages VET schools to further shape the validation of learning and work experience, by making the shortening of courses for those with work experience via a validation procedure an eligible developmental component.
- With the Incentive Scheme for Learning and Development in SMEs (SLIM scheme), the government wants to encourage SME employers to strengthen their learning culture (Web.Ref. SLIM 2020). The SLIM scheme is in place as of 1 January 2020. In small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), it is less common for employees to learn and develop while working. SMEs can apply for subsidies for, among other things, mapping

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11 <https://www.wij-techniek.nl>

the training and development needs of employees. Annually, €48 million is available for SLIM (€29.5 million for individual SMEs, €17.5 million for partnerships within SMEs and €1.2 million for large companies in the agriculture, hospitality and recreation sectors).

### 9.1.1 Distribution of costs

As noted above validation arrangements in both routes are financed in different ways by different stakeholders.

Several other general comments can be made in relation to the costs to organisations of implementing validation arrangements:

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

## 9.2 Beneficiaries and users of validation processes

### 9.2.1 Validation trends

Ever since the dual system was operationalised in 2016, the focus has been on turning policy into practice. Apart from strengthening linkage of both validation systems, the quality of validation services offered, the options for tailored learning, and raising the awareness of learners, employers and teachers are the main critical success factor. Stakeholders in both VPL routes have agreed on actions at both the system-level and user-level, including improving the linkage and quality of VLW and VPL procedures, providing tailored learning options as a result of validation arrangements, critically reviewing legal frameworks, and last but not least, realising the concept of learning outcomes in education and training programs. The main characteristics being:

- In the education route, Validation of Learning and Working Experiences (VLW) can take place in a quality assured setting and in linkage with a national standard (educational or occupational standards).
- In the labour market route, VLW may also focus on someone's potential or employability and result in a learning or career advice. In this case, VPL processes or procedures are the term used.
- Integration of validation arrangements into formal learning processes has benefits for making education more flexible: learning outcomes as learning units, intake assessment, hybrid learning pathways, work-based learning, etc.
- VLW is integrated in learning path independent strategies for lifelong learning. These strategies are apparent in both routes and can be linked to:
  - The systemic level by means of referencing to either sector qualifications or to national qualifications.
  - The individual level by means of assessing someone's learning experiences for the sake of employability, qualification, personal development, second chance learning, empowerment or reflection on skills needs.

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



the education route is not recorded because most are amalgamated with the numbers of adult learners undertaking or completing a learning programme at VET or HE level.

More recent numbers of VPL applications in the education route are not available because of the integration of VPL in formal learning processes. The estimation is that especially in part-time and dual learning programmes much use is made of VPL for work-based learning experiences, as well as for learning through work-based tasks.

The actual number of 'ervaringscertificaten' awarded in the labour market route is only registered for the accredited VPL providers. These providers accounted for a total of 3.362 VPL procedures in 2022 leading to issuing an 'ervaringscertificaat' (NKEVC, 2023).

Table 8.2.1.1 shows the slow but gradual rise in the number of 'ervaringscertificaten' awarded since 2015 from 128 to 3.362 in 2022. These numbers only account for the certificates issued and registered by the NKEVC. The increase in the award of certificates for VET levels 3 and 4 is notable, as well as the increase in awarding certificates for the recognition of (parts of) occupational standards within the HR departments of companies. Also, there is a shift in the purpose for which "ervaringscertificaten" are awarded, moving quantitatively from obtaining an equivalent to a formal qualification in the education route to meeting occupational standards for the labour market.

Table 8.2.1.1

Overzicht d.d. 06-02-2023	<2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Totaal
Mbo 1	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	3
Mbo 2	11	15	87	180	103	91	88	69	644
Mbo 3	16	46	145	255	300	348	393	385	1.888
Mbo 4	47	74	108	338	518	410	547	718	2.760
Hbo	21	31	88	333	282	203	258	226	1.442
BOC	0	8	61	80	92	1.105	136	81	1.563
Beroepsstandaarden	0	0	0	69	647	106	1.176	1.158	3.156
Branchestandaarden	33	79	175	468	208	135	219	725	2.042
<b>Totaal</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>253</b>	<b>665</b>	<b>1.723</b>	<b>2.152</b>	<b>2.398</b>	<b>2.817</b>	<b>3.362</b>	<b>13.498</b>
Onderwijsstandaarden	95	166	429	1.106	1.205	1.052	1.286	1.398	6.737
Arbeidsmarktstandaarden	33	87	236	617	947	1.346	1.531	1.964	6.761
<b>Totaal</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>253</b>	<b>665</b>	<b>1.723</b>	<b>2.152</b>	<b>2.398</b>	<b>2.817</b>	<b>3.362</b>	<b>13.498</b>
<b>Marktaandeel</b>									
Onderwijsstandaarden	74%	66%	65%	64%	56%	44%	46%	42%	50%
Arbeidsmarktstandaarden	26%	34%	35%	36%	44%	56%	54%	58%	50%
<b>Totaal</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC, information mailed 07-03-2023.

\* Translation:

- MBO1-4: VET levels 1-4.
- HBO: bachelor levels 5/6.
- BOC: Professional transversal skills.
- Beroepsstandaarden: occupational standards.
- Onderwijsstandaarden: qualification standards.
- Arbeidsmarktstandaarden: labour market or occupational standards.

## 9.2.2 Validation users

Validation arrangements can be used:

- as the basis for individuals to develop their informal or non-formal skills,
- in the labour market for further career building and non-formal lifelong learning opportunities,
- for obtaining a full qualification when the individual has met all required learning outcomes that were defined for this qualification,
- for designated target groups, assisting them in their (re-)orientation on employment-opportunities.

- as a basis to obtain exemptions from courses in formal education when an individual has only partly obtained the learning outcomes required for a given formal qualification.

While in practice most providers still conduct mainly summative validation arrangements, the formative use of validation for advice and/or orientation on career-opportunities is increasingly used in the context of career guidance and development and in inclusion strategies for specific groups with the aim of identifying their training needs and adjusting training programmes accordingly.

The benefits of validation arrangements are considered high, especially when the validation process not only covers summative but also formative validation. State-of-the-art research shows that the summative aims and (potential) benefits are still the main priority of both labour market organisations (public and organisations and private companies) as well as individuals, but the utilisation of formative validation arrangements is growing in importance. In general, one can state that the role and value of validation arrangements in the Netherlands is considered as being very valuable for the objectives of contributing to the personal and professional development of people in both the learning and working contexts (MSZW, 2021, 2022 a, b; SER, 2020, 2021a & b)

In the Netherlands, validation is used by all kinds of target groups: old and young, male and female, migrants and locals, etc. There is no discrimination when it comes to validation. It also covers all levels of qualifications, occupational standards and covers almost all labour market sectors as well as the variety of lifelong learning perspectives (qualification, employability, participation, personal development).

### 9.2.3 Validation and disadvantaged groups

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

There are many target groups addressed by means of portfolio-training for an assessment, career-guidance for jobseekers, talent scanning for youth:

- Youth: a recent survey showed that entrepreneurship is popular among young people, but also that young people are more often quitting their businesses again. Developments in the (international) labour market call for an entrepreneurial workforce. This offers opportunities for young people. However, it is important that they are stimulated and well prepared for this in education, more so than at present, including by learning the right entrepreneurial skills.
- Migrants and refugees with a non-western migration background have structural disadvantages in the labour market. On average, they have lower employment rates, poorer contracts and lower wages. They are also more often unemployed and overrepresented in welfare. To turn the tide, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW) launched the Further Integration in the Labour Market (VIA) programme in 2018. The programme focuses on reducing labour market disadvantages of people with a non-Western migration background and creating equal opportunities for this group. The programme consists of eight pilots focusing on crucial moments in the careers of people with a migration background. These are moments where disadvantages arise and where an effective approach can make a big difference. (MSZW, 2021a&b). The preliminary findings are that the programme contributes in four main areas:
  - 1 Better understanding of what (does not) work in practice to structurally strengthen the labour market position of citizens with migration background.
  - 2 A broader vanguard, showing that it can be done.
  - 3 A basis for further upscaling of proven effective actions, in policy and practice.
  - 4 More opportunities to measure how the labour market position of citizens with a migration background develops.

An example of a local initiative involving migrants is listed in the box below.

### **Box 7: The International Women's Centre (IVC)**

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

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

The training is organised according to the Swiss CH-Q method (a Swiss vocational qualifications programme that developed tools to document personal competences). CH-Q follows the steps of the validation process: raising awareness, documentation, presentation, assessment and certification. The main driver for this method is creating ownership by self-managing one's learning experiences. The focus of the IVC-training is equal to this: enabling individuals to manage their own careers, articulate their own development needs and build up their own portfolio with proof of their competencies.

After passing the training and presenting their personal action plan, the students receive an approved certificate. The IVC-training has been offered since 2009 and is successfully carried out every year. The training is offered 'on demand'; since 2009, more than 60 migrant women participated in the training; of this group, many found jobs (paid and voluntary work) or accessed a qualification programme at a VET-school or university.

Source: <https://ivcdenhelder.nl/activiteiten/>

## **10 Validation methods**

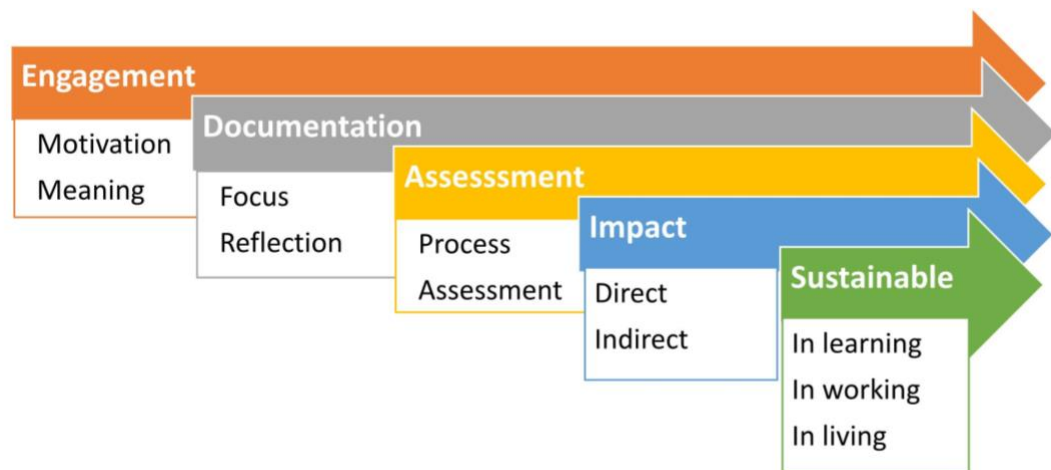
### **10.1 Methodologies and methods**

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

1. **Engagement** focuses on being aware that someone has already acquired many formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences that might be valuable. A person can exploit these competences through self-management. A wide range of aspirations may be achievable due to a person's prior experience and can therefore be deployed to determine an individual learning objective. Such learning objectives range from activation in the person's private life, empowerment, personal development and career development in education and occupation to creating flexibility and mobility in order to access or move up levels or jobs on the labour market.
2. **Recognition and documentation** are focused on identifying and organising actual individual learning experiences and translating them into skills and competences. The description of these competences is then recorded in a portfolio. In addition to this description of the competences acquired through paid and voluntary work, qualifications, leisure activities, etc., the portfolio is supplemented with evidence proving the acquisition of learning, such as certificates, job reviews, references, documents, videos or pictures which substantiate the claim of possessing certain competences.

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

Figure 9.1.1 The VLW process-steps



Source: Duvekot, 2016.

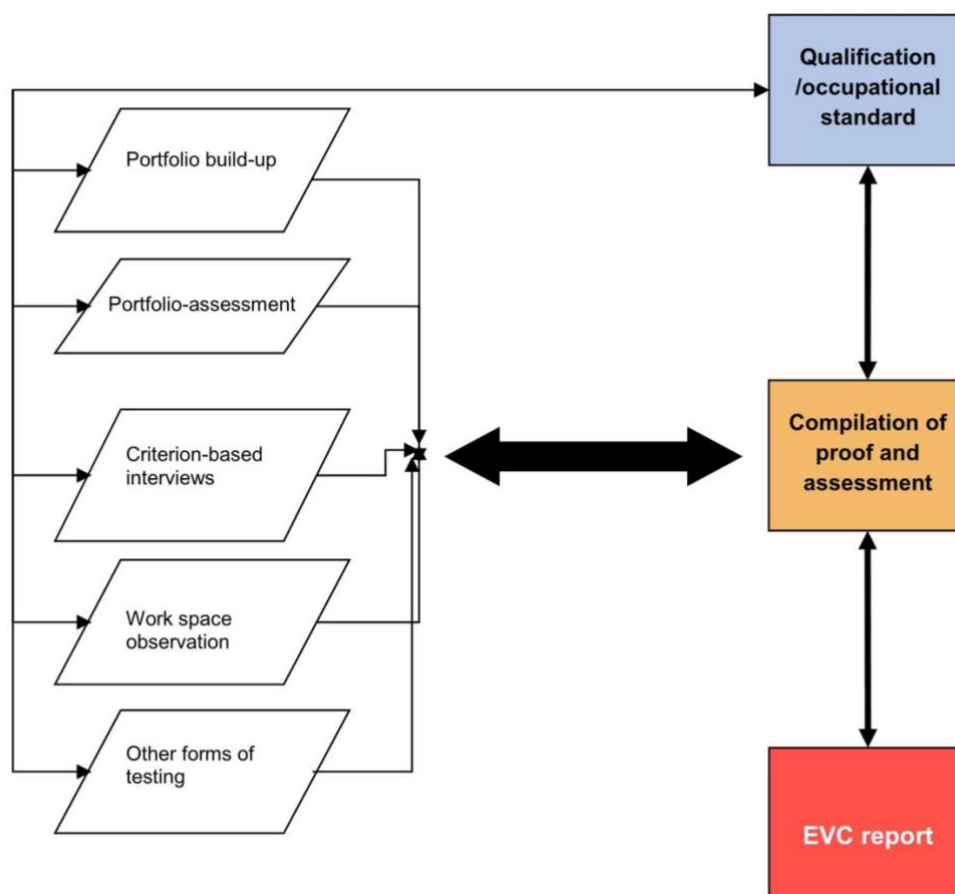
Candidates who want to reflect on their prior learning outcomes in relation to a qualification (as is the case in the 'education route') have to fill in a portfolio (showcase) in which they can demonstrate how their learning experiences match with the competences in the qualification they have chosen. They are then assessed, and an assessment report is produced stating all the learning outcomes that match with the learning outcomes that are defined for the chosen qualification. With this report, candidates can then present themselves to the awarding body (the examination committee) of the VET school or university. In this way, it becomes clear that the outcome of a validation procedure primarily officialises the recognition of learning which candidates use to apply to the awarding body. Only the awarding body is allowed to turn the recognition into an official exemption. This

awarding body can decide on exemptions in the learning programme. Based on these exemptions, it is possible to achieve a (partial or full) qualification.

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

- Portfolio development
- Critical, criterion based interviews
- Portfolio assessment
- Observations and workplace visits (performance assessment)
- Other assessments (360° feedback, *imitatio ludem*, etc.)

Figure 9.1.2 The VPL process steps in the education route



Source: ECI (2008)

As the trend towards linking VLW with personalised learning continues, and in line with the dualistic approach implemented in the Netherlands since 2013, which offers two pathways for utilising VLW, there is growing evidence about the types of validation uses (Duvekot, 2016):

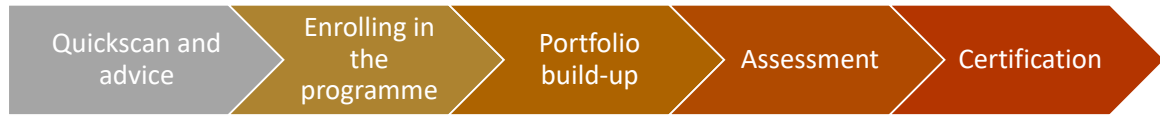
- VLW'S function is to allow users to design or co-design and manage their own learning programmes if they have a broad understanding of their learning experiences and can reflect upon these to help their further learning.
- Previously acquired learning experiences can be recorded in a portfolio. The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



## The VLW process in the labour market route

In the labour market route, the validation process follows the steps in the generic model for the VLW process. The certification in this route is always a 'ervaringscertificaat'.

Figure 9.1.3 The VPL process steps in the labour market route



Source: <https://evc-centrum-nederland.nl/wat-is-evc/>

The steps are completed as follows:

1. Once candidates have completed a quick scan on the website, a telephone consultation follows. Candidates will be informed of the outcome of the telephone consultation by e-mail. A quick scan is a tool to assess a person's potential in broad terms. The aim is to find out whether, on the one hand, the work situation and, on the other hand, the activities performed by the employee give sufficient reason for the candidate to go through the VPL procedure. Furthermore, a quick scan aims to determine the level at which the VPL procedure should be carried out.
2. Candidates who want to start the VPL procedure after receiving the outcome of the telephone consultation will fill in the registration form. As confirmation, they will receive a personal login code for the digital VPL tool by e-mail within 2 working days.
3. In this VPL tool, candidates draw up a portfolio with all relevant and demonstrable experiences and add the supporting documents. They can include in their portfolio supporting evidence such as diplomas, job descriptions, assessments, certificates, plans, reports, photos, logs, etc. All supporting documents must be authentic and anonymous. When completing the VPL tool, candidates are assisted by a portfolio supervisor, an expert in their own specific field. In addition, group portfolio meetings are held.
4. Once the portfolio has been completed, the assessment will follow. This is an assessment in the form of a workplace visit and interview of approximately one and a half hours. During the workplace visit (only at VET) candidates show the assessor a demonstration of their work and are then interviewed about the portfolio. With VPL at HE level, the assessment only consists of an interview.
5. Following the assessment, the assessor will draft a report known as an "Experience Certificate," which will include a detailed explanation for each recognized competency. The candidate will receive this official certificate digitally, typically four weeks after the assessment. The certificate will also be added to the Register of Certificates of Experience.

Depending on the type of VPL procedure someone goes through, he/she can redeem the 'Certificate of Experience'. For a sector, professional or occupational standard, he/she can apply for a Certificate of Experience for linkage with professional standards.). This certificate expresses one's value set against the function- or qualification standard. For VET and HE, someone can request a personal training plan from the institution so that he/she can obtain a diploma. In this training plan, the exemptions that the Certificate of Experience' as demonstrated have been incorporated as well as possible.

## 10.2 Use of ICT in validation

In recent years, institutions have invested in facilities to enable digital assessment on a larger scale. Many initiatives were already in place, like digital portfolio building and e-coaching in portfolio build-up, but due to the Corona crisis also digital assessments were applied more and more. (Web.Ref. SURF, 2023)

Education institutes and VPL providers invested in the design of digital assessment and making use of software for online proctoring. It has also breathed new life into the discussion about the role of assessments in educational programmes, in addition to the fact that the demand for increasing flexibility and the increase in blended forms of education also contribute to a different view of the role and function of (digital) assessments.

Online proctoring especially is an interesting application in ICT-enhanced VPL processes. It offers the possibility to assess students remotely and independently of location under controlled conditions. Due to the current circumstances, institutions are using online proctoring as an alternative form of testing, in addition to, for example, oral exams, written essays and open book exams. The choice to use online proctoring is up to each institution and can differ according to situation, study programme and exam. The white paper of SURF (2020) paved the way for this. The paper contains information and considerations that institutions can take into account when making the choice whether to conduct invigilation online, and if so, under what conditions. Privacy considerations play a major role in the use of online proctoring. Quality assurance.

SURF is a cooperative association of Dutch educational and research institutions in which the members combine their strengths. Within SURF, the members work together to acquire or develop the best possible digital services, and to encourage knowledge sharing through continuous innovation. The members are the owners of SURF.

These ICT-developments clearly also affect VPL procedures. The description of the ICT application in the steps of the VPL process (see figure 9.1.3) in the labour market demonstrate this clearly: ICT is implemented in all steps of the procedure.

## 11 Quality assurance

### 11.1 Quality assurance processes

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

In recent years, however, validation arrangements have become so integrated into the learning provision of schools, universities, training institutes and career offices that the professionalism of the staff has become naturally linked to the usual forms of quality assurance and control. For instance, audits of courses in VET or HE nowadays automatically also ask about how the institution guarantees the quality of guides and assessors in case of validation applications.

In the labour market route, the National Quality Code for VPL (based on the 'European Common Principles for Recognition and Validation of Non-formal and Informal Competencies') was initiated in 2006 as an instrument for stimulating the use of VPL processes in VET and HE (PLW, 2009), by creating control and trust in the quality of VPL providers. This registration process entails several steps concerning the quality of the process offered, the quality of staff involved and the independence of the organisation (EVC, 2006):

1. The goal of validation is to define, evaluate and accredit individual competencies. The accreditation of prior learning has a value in and of itself and contributes to employability. In many cases, validation can be a benefit to further career-related personal development.

2. Individual entitlements: the VPL process answers to the need of the individual. Entitlements and arrangements with the validation-offering organisations are clearly defined.
3. Procedure and instruments are reliable and based on solid standards. Trust is the key issue; it has to do with civil effect, properly defined standards, and clear information on the way in which assessments are conducted and the arguments on the basis of which conclusions are drawn.
4. Assessors and supervisors are competent, independent and impartial. Independence and impartiality are crucial factors in the evaluation and are rooted in the roles and responsibilities of the assessors involved in the process. It is of major importance to avoid unnecessary confusion of roles. Impartiality can be reinforced by training and the use of networks.
5. The quality of VPL procedures is guaranteed and is being improved on an on-going basis. The quality of the VPL procedure and the set of instruments used is guaranteed.

In 2012, the code was upgraded to a tripartite governed quality instrument. Government, employers and trade unions declared by signing the *VPL* covenant that VPL was now – on top of the qualification-instrument – also to be grounded as a labour market tool for career guidance (Vsl EVC, 2012). In 2016, the Labour Foundation (trade unions and employers, <https://www.stvda.nl/en>) and the government (ministries of Education, Social Affairs and Economic Affairs) renewed the covenant in which they made agreements on promoting VPL and similar instruments in the education and labour market route and on their quality. This covenant was extended twice by two years to the end of 2022.

Prolonging the covenant in 2023 led to splitting up the partners:

- In consultation with the social partners, the government decided not to follow up on the VPL covenant of the government and the Labor Foundation, which expires at the end of 2022, since VPL procedures are eligible for reimbursement via STAP and serve as an instrument within the government's policy to stimulate validation of skills.

The STAP-facility offers budgets for workers and jobseekers to encourage training, including VPL-procedures since 2022. The personalised STAP budget is maximised at €1,000 (incl. VAT). However, the STAP-facility is ending in 2023. The government is looking for new ways to continue encouraging learning and development from 2024. *STAP-budget.nl* will continue as an orientation platform for finding the best and cheapest training for personal development.

- Notable in this respect is the update of the Quality code 3.0 for accredited VPL-providers. In the labour market route. This update aims, in combination with the promotion of transversal skills of competences in the labour market route, at strengthening trust in the quality of the VPL-providers – falling under the terms of the covenant - by a system with independent, external agencies auditing periodically the VPL-activities of the accredited VPL-providers. With this update, the auditing is geared at building more trust of the education institutes so that they can better integrate the content of 'ervaringscertificaten' by its deliverance of the transversal qualities of a learner. This is helpful in getting more grip not just on the linkage of formal and non-formal learning experiences of learners, but moreover on the usability of their informal learning outcomes for recognizing and validating their generic learning outcomes in formal learning standards (NKEVC, 2022).

The *Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC* ensures the quality of the VPL procedures in the labour market route Furthermore, the *Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC* set up a register for administrating people's '*ervaringscertificaat*' and accredits the VPL-providers in the labour market. In total, 28 VPL-providers are accredited for providing VPL-services in the labour market route as of January 1, 2023 (Web.ref. NKEVC, 2023).

Apart from the monitoring and evaluation that is carried out under the Quality Code and through the quality-systems in the education route, there is no official framework for



qualitative and quantitative evaluation of progress and practice of validation arrangements in the Netherlands.

There has been incidental research dedicated specifically to the quantity, impact and quality-aspects of VPL in 2011-2012 (Profitwise, 2011; Ecorys, 2012), but since then no structured research has been done on the VLW-system as such. The validation-systematics are only researched now as an integrated part in accreditation of VET- and HE-programmes, or in pilot-projects on sector levels in the labour market routes.

## 11.2 Monitoring and evaluation

Since 2018, many of the qualitative and quantitative bottlenecks in the use of the dual validation system (MOCW, 2018) have been resolved for (1) better communication and more transparency on the recognition and value of results in both validation routes and (2) improvement of the cooperation between VPL providers in the labour market route and the educational institutions in the education route. Next to this, the legislative process to make the NLQF structural in nature and also allow statements on formal qualification levels of the relevant programmes and MCs is under way (MZSW, 2022a).

In addition, research is ongoing for (1) strengthening the use of validation instruments in the labour market route and (2) for reviewing the existing legislation relating to the educational route in order to realise more possibilities for tailored programmes for adults in VET (Casteren, et al, 2021; MSZW, 2021b, 2022a; SER, 2021b). The labour market increasingly demands flexible learning paths, with a focus on training and maintaining competent employees. The end objective is not necessarily the award of a qualification. More and more educational institutions (VET and HE) and sectoral training institutes are developing tailored, flexible learning pathways, including procedures for validating prior personal and/or work experiences. Much work has been done to modernise and implement so-called validation pathways: from designing learning outcomes and coordinating with exam boards to exploring different learning and development paths that do justice to what the learner has already learned. A major challenge here is to support employers in instilling a different learning culture and bringing urgency to those employees who currently feel no need to develop their skills, other than taking part in the occasional training course. In the health care and social work sectors, for example, qualifying staff often took precedence. While it is still important to have knowledge, today the focus is primarily on possessing specific skills and competencies that can be applied to particular tasks or areas of expertise. As this trend has developed, VPL has become increasingly relevant. Rather than solely focusing on outcomes, it also encourages employees to pursue personal development (Duvekot & Onstenk, 2021; Duvekot, 2022; SER, 2020).

### **Monitoring and evaluation in the education route**

In the education route, monitoring and evaluation is ongoing on the integration of validation arrangements in education programmes, both in VET and in HE.

The approach with learning outcomes is also elaborated and shaped in the framework of MBOin2030. The ministerial project MBOin2030 [VET in 2030] is geared towards providing an infrastructure in VET in which learners can learn anywhere, formally and informally. This should ensure lifelong learning and personal development for the users. This has implications for validation: valuing what one has learned.

In addition, the Lifelong Development Knowledge Centre ('Kennispunt MBO leven lang ontwikkelen') has been established for VET. VET schools can contact the knowledge centre with questions about the policy and implementation of customisation for adults, flexibilisation of education, certificate pathways, exemptions, practical solutions and quality assurance. The knowledge centre encourages schools to draw up their own instruments for validating learning and work experience. ([Kennispunt MBO Leven Lang Ontwikkelen](#))

Higher education institutions are experimenting to make their programmes more flexible by integrating learning and validation processes (Casteren et al, 2021). Validation

arrangements are at the heart of this experimentation. In the experimentation, learning outcomes can be achieved regardless of form, location and time. What matters is not how and when, but what someone has learned. The assessment of learning outcomes thus becomes the sum of validating learning outcomes already achieved and what has been additionally learned through a customised learning pathway. These learning pathways emphasise learners' own direction. In consultation with a study coach, students themselves can help determine what they still need to learn and how they want to learn it (in practice and/or via (self)study).

The experiences with learning outcomes, with learning pathway-independent assessment and with (supervised) promotion of self-direction among students in the Learning Outcomes experiment also contribute to the development of a new vision of VPL, in the form of 'dialogic validation'. Here, the translation of personal learning experiences into learning outcomes is organised in a dialogue between student and trainer. This validation approach puts the learner at the centre and gives them a voice. It also stimulates a student's reflection on his/her own development, which was an important part of the learning outcomes experiments.

### **Monitoring and evaluation in the labour market route**

In recent years, more and more initiatives have emerged in the labour market with the aim of identifying the knowledge, skills and competences already acquired by individuals. This seems to broaden the thinking on previously acquired competences in the form of VPL procedures to the importance of a skills-oriented labour market. Further knowledge building on innovative initiatives that contribute to LLL and sustainable employability is encouraged by the government and social partners. In these initiatives, VPL procedures are distinguished from other validation instruments using measurement standards. The quality of validation is also assured. This puts VPL procedures on the side of 'most objective' within the spectrum of validation. This is why employed people and jobseekers can also apply for a STAP budget to follow a VPL procedure. Many sector and industry organisations also have their own schemes for training and more specifically for VPL. VPL processes should then be carried out by a recognised VPL provider. The quality assurance of these schemes is thus 'outsourced' to the National Knowledge Centre VPL that assures the quality of the VPL providers.

## 12 The position of validation in society: visibility and trust

With the legal and organizational framework and validation-methodology in place, validation arrangements increasingly focus since 2018 on making policy, frameworks and methodology work in practice by strengthening the linkage of and the quality of validation arrangements in both validation routes, training of professionals, implementation-initiatives on the learning outcomes approach and reaching out to specific target groups, for instance refugees.

Since the dual system was implemented in 2016, the implementation of VLW has been focused on translating policy into practice. To achieve this goal, several critical success factors have been identified, including improving the linkage of the two validation routes, enhancing the quality of validation services, and providing tailored learning options. Additionally, raising awareness among learners, employers, and teachers is essential. To address these factors, stakeholders in both routes have agreed to take actions such as improving the linkage and quality of validation systems, offering tailored learning options, critically reviewing legal frameworks for validation, and incorporating the concept of learning outcomes into education and training programmes. This approach is particularly relevant as it aligns with the current era of personal standards, rather than the past era of education- or supply-driven learning.

Since 2020, the integrative process of the dual strategy of 2016 has emerged across all domains of learning, working, and living (SER 2021a, 2021b; UNESCO, 2021; MSZW, 2022a; Duvekot, 2023). At the core of this final step is the recognition of personal ownership of one's lifelong development process and the use of validation methods for dialogues on validation and learning in a dialogical process that incorporates three intertwined standards:

- a) The learner with personal reference standards (ambition, motivation, professional products, work experiences, etc.) as input for the dialogue on lifelong learning.
- b) The learning system, represented by the teacher (assessor, coach, guide & teacher) with qualification standards as input for the dialogue.
- c) The working system, represented by the human resources manager with professional or occupational standards as input for the dialogue. (Duvekot, 2023)

This process is characterised by a gradual shift towards a learning culture that places the learner at the centre of (lifelong) learning. This means moving away from an analytical, mass learning, and control-oriented paradigm towards a more holistic, personalised, customised, and trust-based learning approach. This transition is visible in the growing emphasis on the learner as the primary actor in the 'game' of (lifelong) learning. It is in fact a shift in the learning culture from *control of what needs to be learned*, to *trust in what has been and can be learned*. One may state that VPL is the change-maker in this final subphase.

It is clear from state-of-the-art VLW development presented in this report that the integration of validation arrangements in lifelong learning strategies in both work-based and school/university-based learning environments is linked to the learning paradigm shift from the analytic to the holistic learning perspective. Validation arrangements enable this shift by its focus on:

1. Enhancing opportunities for empowerment and deployment: the primary motivation behind validation arrangements is to enhance the empowerment and deployment of individual talent. By highlighting an individual's competences and strengths, validation arrangements can increase opportunities both in private life and on the labour market. This is true for individuals who are already employed, as well as for jobseekers. Employers and trade unions also benefit from validation arrangements by improving the employability of their employees within the working context. Overall, validation arrangements aim to support individuals in achieving their full potential and

advancing their careers, while also benefiting companies and other labour market organisations by promoting a highly skilled and capable workforce.

2. Creating a more demand-led labour market: improving the match between the learning system and the labour market is essential for the organisation of validation processes. To improve deployment, labour market functions must be expressed in terms of competences. These competences must in turn be linked to a demand for learning. The learning system must be receptive, transparent, flexible and demand-led in order to be able to provide the customised approach required.
3. Making learning more flexible and personalised: the recognition of informally and non-formally acquired competences will boost people's desire to keep on learning, i.e. it will promote lifelong learning, since the accreditation of competences can lead directly to an award of qualifications or exemptions from qualifications. The recognition approach can also make visible or recognisable existing competences and qualifications within or outside the labour process. This promotes the transparency of the many opportunities for learning. The learning individual will not only want to learn in a customer-oriented fashion but will also know better than now how, what and when to learn, and why he or she is learning.
4. Optimising other forms of learning: other learning environments and forms of learning must be formulated and/or utilised more effectively, since validation arrangements also show which learning environment and/or form of learning is best for a particular individual. This could include (combinations of) on the job training, mentoring/tutoring, independent learning, distance learning, and so on. The recognition of competences and qualifications will inevitably lead to an adjustment of the existing qualification structure in professional education. The existing description of exit qualifications in the current qualification structure for professional education does not always tie in with the competences required on the labour market.

The present actions are aimed at strengthening the quality of validation services for all citizens. Ensuring the linkage of both validation routes and effective communication on VLW within and between them are key factors for the successful implementation of VLW, benefiting everyone involved. This remains a critical success factor for VLW's implementation.

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# European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2023 update

This report is part of the 2023 update of the [European Inventory on the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#). The inventory provides a comprehensive overview of validation practices across Europe, covering 32 systems in EU-27 Member States and EFTA countries.

The European inventory is the product of a long-standing cooperation of the European Commission, Cedefop and ETF on the field. The inventory was endorsed by the [Council recommendation of 2012](#) on validation and works together with the [European guidelines](#) as a tool to support countries in developing and implementing validation arrangements.

A rich source of information, the inventory informs dialogue and learning between countries and stakeholders developing and implementing validation in Europe. Our key objective is to support Member States so that more learners and workers can acquire and make visible new skills, which will support their career and further learning and improve their quality of life.

**CEDEFOP**European Centre for the Development  
of Vocational Training

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Europe 123, Thessaloniki (Pylea), GREECE  
Postal address: Cedefop service post, 57001 Thermi, GREECE  
Tel. +30 2310490111, Fax +30 2310490020, Email: [info@cedefop.europa.eu](mailto:info@cedefop.europa.eu)

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