

*Validation of Prior Learning as a multi-targeted  
approach for access to learning opportunities for all*

# THE POWER OF VPL

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*The power of VPL is that it empowers both the individual and the organisation!*

Learning is more than ever important and valuable, people are encouraged to invest in their potential throughout their lives, taking into account their prior learning. According to policy papers all across the globe, this should concern all citizens, including the underrepresented groups and non-traditional learners with regard to higher education because everywhere the knowledge-economy needs more higher-educated participation from all.

The European agenda on ‘the Social Dimension of Education and Training’ states that *recognising prior learning and providing individualised support enhances participation of underrepresented groups and non-traditional learners in higher education (HE)*. The strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (*ET2020*) supports this. However, HE-institutions are still considering how to offer/support lifelong learning perspectives and making use of the added value of methods for Validation of Prior Learning (VPL). Some universities develop VPL-practices as an answer to economic and labour market needs; others use VPL as a way to widen access and participation of target groups which are obstructed in getting access to HE. Reality therefore calls for action on making HE more accessible for underrepresented groups and non-traditional learners by focusing on flexible lifelong learning-strategies, opened up by tailor-made VPL-approaches.

The crucial question for the consortium ALLinHE was how to further develop and implement VPL as an effective method in higher education, being able to integrate the selected target groups effectively and quality-assured into lifelong learning at HE-levels? This question related to several national priority areas linked to VPL and the question of accessibility of HE:

- a) further developing and implementing existing national legislation on VPL-enhanced lifelong learning in the learning domain, especially of HE.
- b) shifting from national projects on integrating VPL in tertiary education-levels to practical implementation.

- c) organising the levels of professionalism in HE to be able to cope with customer-steered and competence-based lifelong learning, like functions of guidance, individualised and flexible teaching/learning, managing flexibilised programmes.
- d) opening up HE for all citizens with a special focus on underrepresented groups and non-traditional learners for the sake of opening learning chances for all.

With this question in mind, the consortium ALLinHE linked the issues of underrepresentation of specific target groups and the lack of practical VPL-approaches to a focus on widening access to HE and/or recognition at HE-levels within the sub-action "ERASMUS social inclusion in higher education". Investigating these issues in Europe and Asia (South Korea) resulted in an overview showing the diversity of target groups to work on for creating solutions for social inclusion, more specifically migrants, refugees, elderly (50+), ethnic minorities and special needs groups. The consortium established that there is within existing VPL-methodology a need for a more multi-targeted approach based on the diversity of learner's needs and social-economic opportunities on education-levels across the globe. In the project it became clear that VPL isn't yet fully operational as a multi-targeted approach for:

1. *personalised VPL*, with divergent use of qualification-standards, based on all learning outcomes of the individual; for personal diagnostics, guidance and career-advice,
2. *summative VPL*, with convergent use of various standards within qualification-related contexts, showing the most efficient way to a (HE-)qualification for the target groups.
3. *formative VPL*, with convergent use of qualification-standards within job-specific contexts, especially showing the HE-level of prior learning outcomes and the possibilities for updating/upgrading within HE,

The book 'The Power of VPL' is both result of the project ALLinHE as well as an agenda for further exploring and paving the way for VPL, not only in higher education but also in other qualification-levels and – even better – in contexts of work, volunteering, citizenship, inclusion-activities and leisure. With this book, the aim is to show that lifelong learning is possible in any context, country and culture, and that there are always shared elements that make it possible to make a manageable tool for lifelong learning out of the methodology of VPL. Why this is so relevant and of value to the citizens and their organisations across the globe is explained in the variety of approaches, practices and visions, presented in this book.

# Content

## **Preface 3**

Ruud Duvekot

## **Content 5**

## **Introduction 7**

### ***VPL is about empowerment, employability and lifelong learning***

Ruud Duvekot, Bénédicte Halba, Kirsten Aagaard, Sergij Gabršček & Jane Murray

- 1. *Breaking ground for Validation of Prior Learning in lifelong learning strategies* 21**  
Ruud Duvekot
- 2. *Experience as the basis of eligibility for higher education* 39**  
Per Andersson
- 3. *RPL/VPL Practices in the Academic Credit Bank System of South Korea* 57**  
Hae Young Lee & Young Sang Ko
- 4. *Integrated solutions for adult learning professionals to access master level* 79**  
Simona Sava, Claudia Borca & Elena Danciu
- 5. *The Nordic Network for Adult Learning (NVL) and the promotion of VPL* 91**  
**The role of networks in enhancing VPL as an access tool to learning opportunities and addressing challenges in the Nordic region**  
Antra Carlsen
- 6. *Validation for empowerment and participation in ‘the learning society’* 103**  
**The potential of the UNESCO Guidelines for the recognition, validation and accreditation of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning**  
Madhu Singh
- 7. *A UK Perspective on Validated Prior Learning* 129**  
**Validated Prior Learning as an instrument for access to higher education by two marginalised groups**  
Jane Murray

- 8. *Multidimensional and multi-target approach to VPL in Switzerland* 159**  
**Valuing learning and competences of qualified immigrant women: three case studies**  
Furio Bednarz & Giovanna Bednarz
- 9. *From Confusion to Clarity* 181**  
**Personal perspectives on Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) in the context of Finnish higher education**  
Aino Lepänjuuri and Eila Burns
- 10. *Meeting points in the VPL process – a key challenge for VPL activities* 189**  
Ellen Enggaard and Kirsten Aagaard
- 11. *Supporting migrants in the process of Validation of Prior learning* 201**  
**A French perspective**  
Bénédicte Halba
- 12. *The case of VPL and industry focused programmes in Cork Institute of Technology* 219**  
*Deirdre Goggin, Irene Sheridan and Tim Horgan*
- 13. *Experiences with Validation of Prior Learning in higher education in Norway* 227**  
**Developing guidelines for VPL towards exemptions in higher education**  
Camilla Alfsen
- 14. *Still hiding for the bottom-up approach* 241**  
**The Netherlands: a case of VPL in itself**  
Ruud Duvekot
- The authors 269**

# Introduction

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## VPL is about empowerment, employability and lifelong learning

Ruud Duvekot, Bénédicte Halba, Kirsten Aagaard, Sergij Gabršček & Jane Murray

People are constantly learning everywhere and at all times. Not a single day goes by for everybody without – consciously or unconsciously - acquiring additional skills, knowledge and/or competences. For people outside the initial education and training system, adults in particular, it is very likely that this learning, taking place at home, at the workplace, at school or university, while volunteering, or elsewhere, is more important, relevant and significant than the kind of learning that occurs in formal settings. Non-formal and informal learning – learning that takes place outside of the formal education and training institutions – can be a rich source of human capital development. Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) – especially of non-formal and informal learning outcomes - makes this human capital more visible and more valuable to both the involved persons as well as to society at large. It's not a question of whether this role can be filled-in by the systematics of VPL, it's more a matter of when

### The rise of VPL within lifelong learning policy

Already before the 1990s many initiatives across the globe focused on developing and implementing VPL-enhanced lifelong learning policies for various social and economic perspectives. These initiatives primarily aimed at linking learning needs to national qualification systems. The 1990s however saw a major change in this kind of policy-making. The *Maastricht Treaty* of 1992 (Maastricht Treaty, 1992) set the tone for this change. It arranged education to be more than a national issue. It provided space for the development of European education policy aiming at assisting the development of European citizenship, knowledge exchange within the European (vocational) education and training and integrated education policy for supporting social and cultural goals. The European Union was to play from that moment on an active, supranational role in education policy by providing exchange programs and opportunities to study abroad, developing innovative educational projects and including a framework for general issues, such as the issue of international recognition of (prior) qualifications. This final issue was to be the spring board for the policies on VPL.

This treaty wasn't however yet the major breakthrough towards a more integrative interpretation of the lifelong learning concept. This only occurred in 1994 by widening the focus on lifelong learning towards the so-called human dimension of learning by the European Round Table of Industrialists. They called for lifelong learning not to be treated anymore as 'a poor child in the education chain' but rather as a shared responsibility between individuals, employers and the government. Both employers as well as governments were encouraged to create the necessary, sustainable framework for the

enlarging the availability of adult education programs, a reliable system for transferring credits between institutes of learning and a multi-faceted cooperation between learning institutions, business and local authorities to facilitate access to adult education (ERT, 1994).

At European level this challenge was answered with the *White Paper on education and training* (EU, 1995a). It provided a contribution by acknowledging - amongst others – the value of acquiring competences acquired in non-formal and informal situations. These competences were deemed essential for optimal performance on the labour market and in social functions and most of all in favour of individual entitlement of learning as was announced for 1996 to be the European Year of Lifelong Learning: "*The aim is the promotion of personal development and sense of initiative of individuals, their integration into working life and society, their participation in the democratic decision-making process and their ability to adapt to economic, technological and social change*" (EU, 1995b, p.2).

The change of mood in favour of linking economics with social approaches to lifelong learning, was affected by a strong linkage with work-based learning outcomes. UNESCO, therefore, continued to adhere to its broader view of lifelong learning. In 1996 the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century chaired by Jacques Delors was installed. This commission published in 1996 its report 'Learning: The Treasure Within'. It brought the social approach again to the fore. Lifelong learning was defined "*as the adaptation to changes in technology and as the continuous process of forming whole human beings -their knowledge and aptitudes , as well as the critical faculty and the ability to act . [ - ] Learning Throughout Life is a continuous process for each human being and adapting or adding to his or her knowledge and skills, and his or judgment and capacities for action*" (Delors 1996, pp. 21-22). The emphasis was clearly tuned (again) at the autonomous development of the individual.

Delors cum suis based their views on education in general and their focus on the continuously developing individual in particular on a future scenario in which education was to be based on four principles (ibidem, pp. 86-97):

- *Learning to know* - mastering learning tools rather than acquisition of structured knowledge.
- *Learning to do* - equipping people for the types of work needed now and in the future including innovation and adaptation of learning to future work environments.
- *Learning to live together , and with others* - peacefully resolving conflict, discovering other people and their cultures, fostering community capability, individual competence and capacity, economic resilience, and social inclusion.
- *Learning to be* - education contributing to a person 's complete development: mind and body, intelligence, sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation and spirituality.

The OECD embraced the idea of lifelong learning as the strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In 1996, the OECD education ministers agreed to develop strategies for 'lifelong learning

for all', based on the concept of learning from the cradle to the grave (OECD, 1996). This concept included formal, non-formal, and informal learning:

- Formal learning is always organised and structured, and has learning objectives. From the learner's standpoint, it is always intentional.
- Informal learning is never organised, has no set objective in terms of learning outcomes and is never intentional from the learner's standpoint. Often it is referred to as learning by experience. The idea is that the simple fact of existing, constantly exposes the individual to learning situations, at work, at home or during leisure time for instance. It typically does not lead to certification.
- Non-formal learning is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) but with an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view.

The general acceptance of 'Learning: the treasure within' in these years should be seen against the background of the favourable development of the global economy. What UNESCO, European Union, OECD and others envisaged was their concern about the global economy, social inclusion and individual learning with the objectives of making sure that as many people as possible would be able to participate and perform accordingly to the standards of learning in modern society.

### **From the 1990s to the present age**

The world of the 1990s isn't of course comparable with the present age but VPL as a supportive instrument for the citizen as well as for realizing an open learning society has the power to bring VPL-enhanced lifelong learning strategies closer to a practical reality. A lot of effort still has to be made for this approach to be fulfilled. Least of all worries is convincing governments and policy makers on national and international levels on the potential benefits of VPL-steered lifelong learning policies. The biggest challenge is to convince the other stakeholders embedded in the practicalities of learning within sectors, organisations, institutes, etc. to fill in their responsibility in the VPL-process; this goes for employers, trade unions, learning providers and – above all – for the citizens themselves. The agenda for this is already set in various policy programmes of international and national organisations:

- the Europe 2020 Strategy with its focus on building a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy, delivering high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion. VPL is embedded in the 'flagships initiatives'. This importance of making the skills and competences gained through life and work experience visible was confirmed in 2012 in a broad public consultation (EC, 2012).
- The OECD Skills Strategy (OECD, 2012) in which 'validation-principles' are crucial for achieving the goals of the programme of filling in the need for skills and competences on the labour market.
- ILO's G20 Training Strategy with a validation-focus in the holistic approach to skills development of wage work or self-employment (ILO, 2010).

- UNESCO Guidelines for Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA) of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (UIL, 2012).
- *The Council Recommendation on The Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning* (CEU, 2012) recommending all Member States to have in place, no later than in 2018, arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning which enable individuals to obtain a full or part qualification on the basis of validated non-formal and informal learning experiences.
- *The Education for All Initiative* aiming at bringing the benefits of education to “every citizen in every society” (EFA). In order to realize this aim, a broad coalition of national governments, civil society groups, UNESCO and the World Bank committed themselves to achieving specific education goals.
- The many national and regional initiatives that are apparent across the world in practices of education, training, social and citizenship activities, employability, human resources development and learning as personal development and enjoyability (Singh and Duvetot, 2013; EU Inventory, 2010 & (forthcoming) 2014).

This growing reality can be directly and indirectly supported by (1) implementing the VPL-process and (2) the open mind that VPL brings about by focusing on learning outcomes acquired in formal, informal and non-formal settings. VPL therewith offers a broad ‘window of opportunities’ by opening up (lifelong) learning opportunities for all, as a systematic for both reflective purposes aiming at raising awareness and empowerment of citizens as well as summative and formative objectives. Since learning is ever more connected to social success in this time of economic difficulties, the focus on VPL as a feature of the changing learning culture in Europe focuses on facilitating self-efficacy and competence-based & outcome-steered learning.

### **The project “Access to Lifelong Learning in Higher Education (ALLinHE)”**

It was precisely the above mentioned need for a focus on VPL that was problematised in the project *Access to Lifelong Learning in Higher Education (ALLinHE)* in the period 2010-2014. The project ALLinHE aimed at turning VPL into a practical access point to open the doors of higher education indiscriminately to any learner. By turning existing VPL-methodology into a multi-targeted VPL-approach not only the effectiveness of VPL was expected to be innovated but also the orientation of higher education (HE) - customer-orientation, lifelong learning culture, professionalising staff - to offering learning opportunities for all, to be stimulated.

The project was built on the experiences of universities and higher education institutions to transform into lifelong learning institutions. This was developed in a diversity of local/national realities, related to different national learning cultures in Europe and in South Korea. In this diversity of experiences the project aimed at contributing to the goals of implementing a sustainable competence-based learning culture in which national qualification frameworks can interact with learner centred learning and validation practices for underrepresented and non-traditional target groups.

Furthermore, there was an expected link with strategies for human resources development in which VPL could also be used to match the need for formative development of competences in the contexts of work and volunteering.

The main questions that the project addressed were:

- a. How to develop a strategy and a model for a multi-targeted VPL-approach as an effective instrument for facilitating and including underrepresented groups and non-traditional learners as students in higher education?
- b. How to create a stimulus for realisation and strengthening innovative lifelong learning strategies in higher education for the sake of ALL (inclusive) HE? Does this mean HE with 'a dynamic VPL-steered open-door policy, an innovative programme for professionalising HE-staff in managing open, customer-steered and flexible HE and – last but not least – enhance an open European learning area?

The project's aim was therefore to create a learner centred and multi-targeted VPL-approach, opening up personalised, formative as well as summative perspectives on HE-levels. The target groups selected in each country differed with respect to national strategies and needs to integrate these groups in the higher educational institutions. In this way a broad range of target group practices provided a broad reservoir of 'best-practices' to draw conclusions on.

### **The multi-targeted VPL-approach**

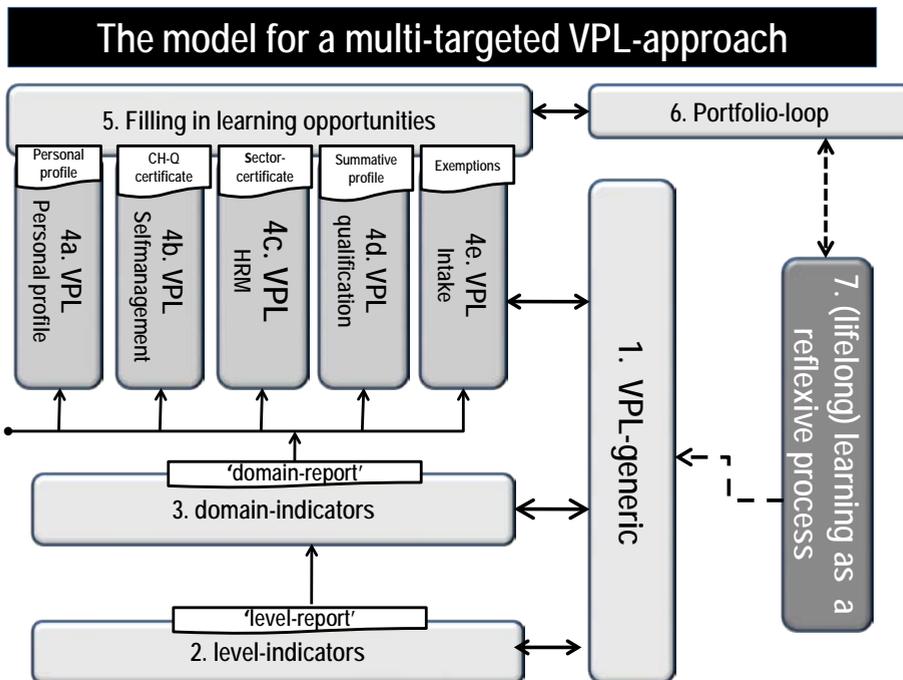
When designing a model for VPL addressing responsibilities of individual, organisation and university, the question arises how to link the learning needs of the individual with the (best) available learning facilities of the learning system and/or with the learning demand from the labour system. The premise is that VPL can serve as this linking-pin by focusing on the diversity of the learning goals of the individual:

- a. Economically aiming at getting and/or keeping a job (employability),
- b. Socially, aiming at motivation, reintegration, self-management of competencies and personal development (empowerment),
- c. Educationally, aiming at qualification, updating, upgrading, portfolio-enrichment by means of creating output-oriented standards (learning outcomes),
- d. For citizenship, aiming at social activation, voluntary activities, social awareness & reintegration and citizenship (activating citizenship),

The framework presented below, gives the floor to VPL as such a multi-targeted linking-pin. It shows the theoretically possible modes of VPL that are applicable between the three primary actors in the process of lifelong learning. These modes or connections mainly occur in 'dialogues' between two of the three stakeholders; sometimes however a 'trialogue' between all three is possible or necessary to communicate on the specificities of a (lifelong) learning strategy.

All stakeholders in these 'dia- or trialogues' can optimize their learning-needs, -facilities and/or –goals, depending on the nature of the individual's need for learning (or development). In this resulting variety of approaches an equal variety in forms of mutual

cooperation occurs. The framework represents therewith an integrated, multi-targeted approach to creating lifelong learning opportunities for all. The different validation-modes in the framework aim at linking any desired potential learning effect of the individual to tailor-made learning facilities in close relation with the given context and state of the art in someone’s personal development process.



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The framework shows itself in an integrated approach in seven steps:

1. **VPL-generic** documents, organises, ranks and compares existing standards from learning (qualifications or vocational standards) and working (occupational standards) in a competence-databank.
2. The second step is about **level-indicators**. Scanning persons for their potential in general on a vocational education (VET)- or higher education (HE)-level. This step consists of a cognitive self-assessment. The questions are based on generic level-descriptors. Output is a general overview of the (potential) personal, cognitive level.
3. The next step on **domain/sector-indicators** builds on the preceding step. It links persons to more specific learning-domains and adds sectoral perspectives. The questions are based on qualification-descriptors and labour-market (sector) descriptors. Output is an overview of the personal potential measured against learning-domains & sectors.
4. The actual validation-modes are operationalized in the fourth step:

- a. **VPL-personal** is a divergent approach in two different modes; both modes are about making transparent the totality of someone's learning outcomes:
    - i. The mode 4a is a personalised programme for making up one's portfolio. Recognition and documentation of all learning outcomes (so far) is at stake here. The desired effect is the empowerment of the individual, in the sense of a strong notion of self-awareness and personal value in relation to a pallet of social opportunities to be engaged in.
    - ii. The mode 4b is a group training-module for self-management of competences. This training is contextualised, depending on the background of the group members. Output is a certified personal portfolio with a personal action plan. The empowerment of the individual is here also at the heart of the group-process. The possible next steps to be taken by the individual are however reflected upon by the other group members, which results in a stronger activation of taking up personal, social opportunities than in form 4a.
  - b. **Formative VPL** is a convergent approach; it's about making transparent where someone stands when measured against a formative standard (HRM-standard; workbased/sectoral). Output is a certified professional report on work-related learning outcomes with an advice for further learning steps. If expected, an extra module for helping an organisation to formulate its function-profiles can be applied; on the basis of these profiles the demand-articulation of an organisation can be 'negotiated' with the employees.
  - c. **Summative VPL** is a convergent approach in two different modes; both forms make transparent where someone stands when measured against a summative standard (VET-qualifications). This approach leads to an overview of the value of prior learning outcomes when someone chooses for a specific qualification:
    - i. VPL for qualification in mode 4d is exploited as an independent assessment-procedure before one decides to enter a school or university in which the validation report can be accepted and can lead to a shortened course or programme.
    - ii. VPL for intake in mode 4e takes place after the decision of subscribing to a course or programme has been made. It is exploited as an intake-procedure for the validation of all prior learning outcomes within the desired course or programme. In this mode VPL directly leads to exemptions.
5. **Follow-up**, or turning the output of one of the VPL-approaches into lifelong learning action. The actual learning is by definition flexible in form (classes, digital, work-embedded, etc), content (modular, integral) and environment (at home, at work, in university, dual, etc.). This action can, depending on the kind of VPL-approach chosen, be focused on:
- Personal competence development in a variety of learning opportunities for strengthening someone's performance in private life, work, citizenship, volunteering or a university-programme.
  - Formative learning steps in a professional context. The sectoral or HRM-standard sets the goals for further learning outcomes. It can focus on updating or upgrading a qualification, applicable to the HRM-standard.

- Summative learning steps in a university-centred process. The aim is to get either a qualification or gain competences from a specific qualification programme.
6. The **portfolio-loop** is essential in determining the need for investment in "human capital". Successively (1) the learning goal in relation to the context is fixed, (2) the portfolio is taken as the basis for the steps to be taken, (3) this portfolio is validated, (4) the portfolio is then enriched with the outcomes of the recent learning trajectory and (5) finally the updated portfolio is taken as a fresh starting point for anticipating upcoming learning questions. The whole process of VPL-steered learning therewith begins and ends with the portfolio. This is called 'the portfolio-loop'.
  7. The final stage in the framework is managing the dynamics of the portfolio for the sake of **reflexive learning**. The continuous process of portfolio-documentation, -validation and -enrichment is providing 'the fuel' for this self-management and leads to a pro-active attitude towards learning and personal development.

### ***"VPL it is, once again!"***

The present publication provides both answers to the project-questions as well as insight in the development of the multi-targeted VPL-approach for vulnerable groups in systems and in countries across the globe. As the companion to the 1st VPL Biennale in Rotterdam, the Netherlands (March 9-11, 2104), this book presents evidence-based case-studies and transnational studies and benchmarks for strengthening the application of validation of prior learning as part of lifelong learning strategies, for the benefit of all, in particular for those who are in danger of social exclusion. All contributions present their own story, showing the diversity of VPL and its contribution to implementing lifelong learning strategies in any given country and context. They either tell a more general story or a more specific one. The goal is to learn from this diversity.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter, *Ruud Duvekot* presents a general framework for developing and implementing the systematics of Validation of Prior Learning in a given context. Nowadays, in the on-going transition to the learning society flexible, continuous and more adaptive learning is required to keep the citizen viable on today's labour market. Staying on top of this development is vital for all actors: individuals, trade unions, schools, universities, employers, legislative and regulatory bodies. Never before in history the individual - or the citizen - got the chance to gain so much control in steering one's career through learning as is the case in the learning society. It is the systematic of VPL that offers this 'window of opportunities' with its focus on opening up learning opportunities on people's own demand. This contribution seeks to answer the crucial question how to activate VPL as an effective instrument for linking competences and credits in lifelong learning that appeal to individual learners and the other stakeholders in learning and working contexts?

The chapter of *Per Andersson* discusses experiences as a basis for admission and particularly eligibility for higher education. The discussion is illustrated by examples from the case of Sweden, a country that has applied measures for widening access to higher

education since the 1970s. Particularly the focus is upon the 25:4 scheme, a measure that gave recognition to experience by granting basic eligibility mainly based on life and work experiences – 25 years of age and 4 years of work experiences were the main criteria for granting basic eligibility. The chapter also presents results from a survey among 25:4 applicants, a study which was focussing their experiences of application, admission, entering higher education, and drop-out or completion. The concepts of institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers towards participation are employed to discuss the results.

*Hae Young Lee* and *Young Sang Ko* provide insight in the learning culture of South Korea in which the further development of VPL could go well together with the present reforms in vocational (higher) qualifications systems. The gap in South Korea between the labour market and HE creates societal instability and unemployment and ironically, this enhances a skills mismatch that forces young people to seek more education and forces employers to invest more in job training for new recruits. The links amongst vocational (higher) education, the labour market and industry could be strengthened in South Korea. It is known that the learning culture of a country determines strongly how RPL/VPL is conceived and operated (Duvekot et al., 2005). The learning culture of South Korea is in this respect predominantly perceived as a model of social selection. Experts believe that the reform of vocational qualifications systems such as the National Competency Standards (NCS) and the National Qualification Framework might play a critical role in adopting VPL. However, with respect to this reform several issues require attention such as the modularisation of learning programmes/courses comparable to NCS, the development of learning outcomes-based curricula and assessment tools and the development of a transfer system amongst NCS-based academic programmes/courses and the Academic Credit Bank System.

*Simona Sava, Claudia Borca & Elena Danciu* state that the need for better access to higher education is widely argued in Europe. Different countries already introduced into their legislation the validation of prior learning outcomes (VPL) as a solution for widening access to different study programs, irrespective of their deliverance at bachelor, master or doctorate level. This contribution discusses how such options can be applied to adult learning professionals (ALPs), in order to provide better access to master levels in countries where such regulation does not yet exist. Different experiences and solutions developed in recent years in this respect are presented.

*Antra Carlsen* presents in chapter 5 the experience of the Nordic Network for Adult Learning (NVL) with networking in adult education as a means of addressing challenges in the Nordic region. The Nordic cooperation and the role of the Nordic Expert Network on Validation within this cooperation is described. This Expert Network is an excellent way of pooling of resources and producing added value to national development work. The Network has developed Nordic recommendations on VPL for decision makers, and has been working with the issues of quality-assurance and competence development in validation. The NVL sets an example for transnational cooperation and development of

policies and instrumentation for lifelong learning and VPL that is beneficial to the participating countries. It also creates synergy with other countries through its affiliation with the European Union and other political entities.

*Madhu Singh's* contribution has two main purposes: to examine the progress made in member states in terms of the *UNESCO Guidelines for the recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of non-formal and informal learning* (UIL, 2012) and to highlight some key recommendations for education systems, emerging from the country analysis. The title of her contribution links to the 'Faure Report' of 1972 that defined 'the learning society' as one in which learning is valued by all members of society, in which stakeholders invest in recognising and developing human learning potential and everyone regards people's non-formal and informal learning as a cornerstone of lifelong learning strategies. Faure argued that the educational system would need complete overhauling if the learning society was to be reached. It's in this context where Singh reflects on the development of VPL-systematics, or in UNESCO-terms 'the recognition, validation and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning (RVA)'. She analyses the countries where mechanisms for RVA are introduced as part of wider education reforms. These reforms typically seek to make education and training better reduce the education-job gap but also make lifelong learning a real possibility for individuals.

The article of *Jane Murray* focuses on a UK perspective regarding validated prior learning (VPL) as an instrument for access to Higher Education by two target groups identified as marginalised within European and UK discourses. The selected groups are (i) people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and (ii) people aged 50-plus. Drawing on data compiled and analysed as part of the ALLinHE-project, the chapter opens with a consideration of the European and UK contexts in regard to VPL. Discussion then turns to characteristics of the two selected groups before moving to focus on VPL processes at macro-, meso- and micro-levels in the UK. The conclusion draws together the UK findings in regard to the two selected groups to posit that a varied picture of VPL supporting Access to HE in the UK exists, influenced by an asymmetric power relationship between HEIs and individual citizens, with HEIs the hegemonic partner.

*Furio Bednarz* and *Giovanna Bednarz* draw on the results of the piloting of the *AllinHE* Model in Switzerland. After the contextualization of VPL practices in Switzerland, the authors shortly present the methodology and the sources of the study, identifying a specific coherent target group (qualified immigrant women), in order to look for convergences and peculiarities of VPL according to 3 diverse modes: VPL as a means for making competences and learning visible, VPL as a means for achieving a qualification, at least a first step in career and lifelong learning pathways, VPL as an entry door to Higher Education. The article takes in account how expectations, goals, processes and outcomes differ from one case to another, putting always learners' narratives at the center, reading institutional impact, strengths and criticalities under this lens, in order to give some relevant inputs for the design of an integrated multidimensional and multi-target VPL- model.

The contribution from *Aino Lepänjuuri and Eila Burns* describes an individual case story of a non-traditional mature (over 50 years) higher education (HE) student with a learning difficulty on his journey to have his skills and competencies recognised in Finnish HE. The process of validation of prior learning (VPL) in the Finnish HE context will be explained and some recommendations based on personal views will be suggested in order to ease and enhance life-long learning opportunities for all learners. Students' individual pro-activeness as well as guidance discussions and inclusive pedagogical practices seem to be key for a successful VPL process for non-traditional learners in Finnish HE.

The article of *Ellen Enggaard and Kirsten Aagaard* is based on two case studies investigating the potential of VPL processes in a social inclusion perspective and of VPL as a means to empower the individual. In the Danish context the right to have prior learning assessed is embedded in the educational system. Therefore the educational institutions play an important role in VPL, not only in assessing prior learning but also in dealing with the entire process of validating prior learning.

The first case study focuses on the individual's meeting with the educational system in his wish to gain formal acknowledgement of his prior learning. The authors focus on the potential and the challenges of this meeting and they discuss the role of the counseling in the process.

In the second case study they focus on the meeting between the individual, the work place and the educational institution. The case focuses on the potential and challenges of using VPL as a means in a strategic competence development project initiated by the work place. They discuss the problems and the conflicts of interest that might arise in such a project, where different stakeholders collaborate in a VPL process.

The focus is on meeting points in VPL processes, concerning the mutual process in understanding each other and – more specifically - the mutual interests and perspectives of the VPL-candidates, the educational system, and the workplace.

*Bénédicte Halba* argues that while Valuing Prior Learning (VPL) has become a major issue in Europe, in France the process of VPL already had and has a long history with the highlight of the 2002 Act dedicated to Social modernization. This act paved the way for assessing professional experiences understood on a broader sense than usual (paid, unpaid and voluntary activities). On the basis of three former projects implemented since 2003 (Vaeb, Va2el and Vab), she illustrates the progress in identifying, valuing and assessing different kinds of non-formal and informal learning outcomes. She emphasizes the added value of the ALLinHE project, focused on people with special needs (50+, migrants and disabled people). In the last part of her article she explains the support to be provided to migrants and councilors to enhance the process of VPL, based on a French experience, in the framework of workshops offered at the Cité des Métiers in Paris (2012-2013).

*Deirdre Goggin, Irene Sheridan and Tim Horgan* report on an interesting case of VPL in industry focused programmes. They argue that as organisations focus on economic indicators and return on investment, their approaches to learning and development opportunities are transformed. In a challenging, competitive climate there is a need to ensure that the long and short term benefits are maximised. The authors describe the experiences and issues raised for Cork Institute of Technology, a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in Ireland in implementing programmes developed in partnership with industry which are mutually beneficial and maintain academic standards. It also addresses the enablers, challenges and barriers in customised course development.

*Camilla Alfsen* describes in her article how Vox, the Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning, has developed guidelines for validation of prior learning towards exemptions in higher education in Norway. The guidelines were developed in 2013 in cooperation with representatives from the sector.

Since 2001, adults in Norway without general admittance certification have a legal right to seek admission to University Colleges or Universities based on validation of prior learning. The law also states that students may seek exemption from parts of the study programme based on their prior learning. Validation of prior learning (VPL) for admittance to higher education is well established. Practice linked to validation towards exemptions in higher education is less well known however. Vox therefore conducted a national survey to find out how many institutions that use this kind of validation and how it is done.

Based on this survey, Vox developed guidelines for validation towards exemptions. This article presents highlights from the survey and the development of the guidelines.

The final contribution in this book from *Ruud Duvekot*, describes and analyses the way in which VPL as a tool for and a vision on lifelong learning strategies is introduced the historical and cultural setting of the Netherlands. While describing the features of development and implementation of VPL in the Dutch setting, not only the necessity to contextualize VPL in order to make it an effective approach and tool in lifelong learning strategies becomes apparent but also the way of doing this in a national learning culture with its specific systems, institutes and the critical success factors that prevail in this culture.

The Netherlands presents itself in this way as a case of VPL in itself since it's from the start geared at integrating VPL in running processes of national and sector systems for learning (education, training) and working (human resources management and development). Looking top-down at this integral approach, a good overview is provided of the many responsibilities that need to be filled-in for using VPL to its full potential. The bottom-up view however gives a different outlook on the real, practical issues for opening up VPL to the users themselves, both in qualitative as well as in quantitative terms. In other words, the case of VPL in the Netherlands from above looks fairly well organised. From the working floor of VPL however the image is quite different and raises a few fundamental questions related to opening up and making use of VPL.

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# Breaking ground for Validation of Prior Learning in lifelong learning strategies

# 1

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## The reflective, summative and formative modes of VPL

Ruud Duvekot

Throughout history people have prepared thoroughly for strengthening and practising their skills in a profession; this has been true from the Middle Ages right through the industrial age. And this is no different in the modern learning society. The prevailing systems of professional training and education do require adjustment and even innovation, because they are part of the changing socio-economic and socio-cultural landscape. Where once upon a time, simply completing a qualification was enough to gain and hold onto your place in society and on the labour market, in ever more cases this no longer holds. Nowadays, in the on-going transition to the learning society flexible, continuous and more adaptive learning is required to keep the citizen viable on today's labour market. Staying on top of this development is vital for all actors: individuals, trade unions, schools, universities, employers, legislative and regulatory bodies. These actors are all tied together closely in the social and economic structure. These ties have always been present, but never before in history the individual – or the citizen – got the chance to gain so much control in steering one's career through learning as is the case in the learning society (Delors 1996, Hargreaves 2004, Duvekot 2006).

It is the systematic of Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) that offers this 'window of opportunities' with its focus on opening up learning opportunities on people's own demand. And since learning is ever more connected to social success, this means focusing on empowerment and personalized control by means of VPL as the main feature of the changing learning paradigm in the present context; a paradigm that is centred around individual choices & decisions and competence-based, outcomes-steered lifelong learning within the context of the learning society. VPL is in this perspective a process oriented instrumentation for recognizing and valuing what people have learned so far in their lives. The VPL-process aims at linking these learning experiences to further development steps or – in other words - to a lifelong learning-strategy for everyone in their given context. In this perspective, VPL is not designed to highlight the lack of competences but precisely the opposite – to take stock of existing competences; in other words, rather than being half empty, VPL takes the view that 'someone's glass is already half filled' (Wg EVC 2000).

The crucial question is how to activate VPL as an effective instrument for linking competences and credits in lifelong learning that appeals to individual learners and other stakeholders in learning and working contexts?

VPL is presented in this chapter in its process-oriented framework. It covers the roles and responsibilities of the main stakeholders in achieving their goals in the lifelong learning-arena where the learning needs of the individual, the facilities from the learning system and the demand for competent people from the prevailing socio-economic system are negotiated. After all, learning is supposed to be established in general in an open dialogue between teachers, employers and learners.

The aim of the framework is to show the potential of VPL in dealing with a diversity of learning goals as a matchmaker between these main stakeholders in lifelong learning processes. This will help in demonstrating how and where to set up interventions for strengthening VPL as a matchmaker for the sake of creating time- and money-effective and - above all – efficient, tailor-made, applied and enjoyable lifelong learning-strategies on a win-win-win-basis for all stakeholders. Isn't it after all – as stated by Paulo Freire decades ago – that learning above all is a personal and social process that makes sense "because women and men learn that through learning they can make and remake themselves, because women and men are able to take responsibility for themselves as beings capable of knowing — of knowing that they know and knowing that they don't." (Freire, 2004, p. 15).

### **The learning society**

The concept of 'the learning society' originated in the period of economic growth of the 1960/70s which created much employment and better life conditions for all people. This evoked a growing need for skilled labour and led in its turn to more attention in national government's policies for the pre-conditional role of education in maintaining and enlarging this rise in 'social and economic wealth'. Education was equated with lifelong learning and a significant and relevant means of transforming social and political life for this purpose (Gelpi 1985; Hobsbawm 1994). The concept of 'the learning society' was built on the notions that learning was important and valuable and that all people needed to be encouraged to invest in their potential throughout their lives, taking into account their prior learning. It was articulated by the UNESCO in 1972 as follows: "*The aim of education is to enable man to be himself, to become himself. And the aim of education in relation to employment and economic progress should be not so much to prepare young people and adults for a specific, lifetime vocation, as to 'optimise' mobility among the professions and afford permanent stimulus to the desire to learn and to train oneself. (-) If learning involves all of one's life, in the sense of both time-span and diversity, and all of society, including its social and economic as well as its educational resources, then we must go even further than the necessary overhaul of 'educational systems' until we reach the stage of a learning society. For these are the true proportions of the challenge education will be facing in the future.*" (Faure e.a. 1972, xxxiii).

This articulation led to an on-going debate on the challenges this vision poses to us all (Schon 1973; Husén 1974; Delors 1996; Edwards 1997; Jarvis 2008). What all these contributions share, is a set of common principles for *the learning society*:

1. there's more to learning than just education,
2. lifelong learning is a necessity since an initial qualification isn't a structural guarantee for a career,
3. acquiring competences isn't restricted to formal learning but also entails informal learning and non-formal learning; all these forms of learning have to be considered as valuable learning,
4. society can be seen as a social and economic structure in which learners all have a learning attitude, implicitly and/or explicitly, and in which learners have to take up their responsibility in this too, lifelong.

In such a learning society the Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) is an important cornerstone of lifelong learning-strategies. VPL operationalizes these strategies by means of bottom-up steered learning-processes. In this way VPL opens up the individual learner's perspectives. This is the social context in which the empowerment of the individual can come to full bloom. Empowerment refers to the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one's life. It implies control over resources and decisions and focuses on the expansion of assets and capabilities of people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives (Narayan 2005).

Such empowerment changes the nature of learning and challenges the learning system to design learning-strategies in different settings and for different purposes. It entails learning which Giddens and Beck perceived as *reflexivity*, which is an expression of the transition to the modernity of *The Learning Society* (Giddens 1991; Beck, 1992). In their view modernity is characterized by the requirement placed upon individuals and institutions to reflect upon what they know in order to make their choices about who they are and how they behave. Giddens accentuated this theme with his notion of 'reflexive modernity' - the argument that, over time, society becomes increasingly more self-aware, reflective, and hence reflexive. In this perception, lifelong learning is a key characteristic of modernity in which meaning and identity are grounded in the self (individual) as the primary agent of change in the Learning Society. VPL therefore supports positioning 'the self' as co-maker of the lifelong learning process.

This conceptualization builds strongly on Paulo Freire's ideas on learning as a developmental and dialogical process of action-reflection-praxis of and by people – teachers and learners (Freire 1970). It is also the kind of learning that fits well into societal development as one of the so-called instrumental freedoms that contribute, directly or indirectly, to the overall freedom that people have to be able to live the way they would like to live (Sen 1999). Nobelprize-winner in economics Amartya Sen formulated that 'social opportunities', as one of the five instrumental freedoms, refer to the arrangements that society makes for education, health care and so on which influence the individual's substantive freedom to live better. These facilities are not only for the sake of conducting private lives but also of great value for more effective

participation in economic and political activities. Learning affects people's private as well as their public lives. Therefore, it is vital for people to have access – or better instrumental freedom – to all forms and phases of learning in order to shape their own destiny. It's precisely with this in mind why VPL can be called the bridge to learning opportunities for all.

### **VPL and the three learning modes**

The development of the systematics of the validation of prior learning (VPL) can best be understood as a confirmation of this shift towards empowerment as facilitated by personalised learning strategies. The understanding grows that the role of the learning system changes from an institutionalised learning system with uniform learning paths and little room for personal input, into a learning system characterized by flexible and more personal steered learning (Duvekot et al 2007). In England this is referred to as 'personalized learning' or the tailoring of pedagogy, curriculum and learning support to meet the needs and aspirations of individual learners (Hargreaves 2004-2006). The same goes for the labour system in which the general norms on the functioning of workers are focused more and more on facilitating their further development instead of controlling labour top-down. One could even say that VPL is about democratising learning and working and, to stay in the terminology of Giddens, enhancing the reflexive character of learning itself.

The starting point of VPL is that initial training for a career no longer suffices. It is important to acknowledge that competences (knowledge, skills, attitude, aspirations) are constantly developing. This means recognizing that someone always and everywhere - consciously and unconsciously – learns through:

- *formal learning*, which occurs in an organised and structured context (in a school/training centre or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically leads to qualification or certification.
  - *non-formal learning*, which is learning embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) but with an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically does not lead to certification.
  - *informal learning*, which results from daily work-related, family or leisure activities. It is not organised or structured (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner's perspective. It typically does not lead to certification.
- (Cedefop 2009)

### **Goals and preconditions**

Lifelong learning above all means 'Validation Learning', i.e. validating *the Learning* that is constantly taking place and learning *the Valuing* in order to start up stimulating and developing lifelong learning in an effective and efficient way. Validation of Prior Learning

in this respect is not only a process underpinning lifelong learning strategies but also the organising principle for designing these strategies.

Evidence for this approach comes from the European research project “Managing European Diversity in lifelong learning 2005-2007” (Duvekot et al, 2007). The project aimed at showing the outline of the learning society by analysing case studies in the profit, non-profit and voluntary sectors in eleven European countries. The analysis supported the vision that ‘Validation of Prior Learning’ is as much a principle as a process, giving true evidence of the transition from the present knowledge society towards the learning society. Society changes to a learning society where the need for a good balance of power between the main stakeholders in lifelong learning - individuals, organisations and the learning system - will be reshaped and the learner will get a real say in designing lifelong learning strategies. The main changes of this transition can be reflected on five levels:

- a. Economically, aiming at getting and/or keeping a job (employability),
- b. Socially, aiming at motivation, reintegration, self-management of competences and personal development (empowerment),
- c. Educationally, aiming at qualification, updating, upgrading or portfolio-enrichment by means of creating output-oriented standards focusing on learning outcomes and learning made to measure,
- d. A fourth level on which the change is having its impact, can also be distinguished, the civil society, aiming at social activation, voluntary activities, societal awareness & reintegration and citizenship (activating citizenship),
- e. On the macro-level finally, authorities and social partners are responsible for organising the match between these levels by means of legislation, regulations, labour agreements, fiscal policy, training funds, etc.

‘Validation of Prior Learning’ as an organising principle of lifelong learning reflects the change towards a learning society in which the individual learner has and takes more responsibilities for his/her own, personal learning process. It also means that the individual learner changes the existing ‘balance of power’ in learning processes because he/she will be steering lifelong learning too with a portfolio. In this portfolio, the learning outcomes that he/she has achieved are documented together with the relevant evidence. In many cases the portfolio even encompasses an action plan for personal development. Such portfolios create a new balance within learning as a process and contribute to the individual’s social identity; above all, they show the road-map for personal development in the context of the organisation and the society.

The emphasis on learning outcomes is in line with the development of common structures of education and training across Europe and is associated with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and the European Qualification Framework (EQF). Thus Valuation of Prior Learning as such contributes to the removal of barriers to the mobility of labour between countries and between sectors. At national levels, learning outcomes are made a central part of the modernisation of qualification systems and frameworks in order to innovate Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education (HE), to

stimulate economic development and to promote social cohesion and citizenship. These goals of ‘Valuation of Prior Learning’ are shown in Figure 2.

| <b>Figure 2: Goals of ‘Validation of Prior Learning’</b> |  |
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| <i>Individual</i>  | Stimulating self-investment in learning; showing learning outcomes; building up a learning biography or portfolio  |
| <i>Organisation</i>                                      | Building up competence management and facilitating employees’ self-investment and articulation of competences; designing lifelong learning strategies in Human Resource Management |
| <i>VET/HE</i>  | Matching learning to real learning needs; offering learning-made-to-measure; focus on learning outcomes; facilitating lifelong learning strategies                                 |
| <i>Civil Society</i>                                     | Activating citizenship; transparency of learning outcomes in the civil society; linkages with other perspectives (qualification, careers)  |
| <i>Macro-level</i>                                       | Concerns policies of governments and social partners and their responsibilities for creating favourable conditions for lifelong learning through laws and regulations              |
| Source: Duvekot et al, 2007                              |  |

Important preconditions for creating a learning society in which these benefits come to full bloom, are:

1. A transparent, output-oriented knowledge infrastructure;
2. Creating trust by (a) focusing on the already available quality-system based on the judgement of the existing assessment processes used by schools, colleges and universities and (b) prospective quality-management by introducing external peer-reviews on quality-issues for the future;
3. A transparently structured education sector, that allows a flexible flow of participants from one layer of sector to another, both intra- as well as inter-sectoral;
4. Universal, transparent and interchangeable procedures and reports on the competences that have been valued;
5. Close relations between educational institutions and their associates/partners (enterprises, government institutions, institutions in the field of (re)integration of unemployed into the labour market);
6. Creating possibilities for developing and executing individual tailor made learning paths;
7. Facilities for financing flexible tailor made individual learning routes, such as an individual learning account;
8. Clear communication to citizens about the technical and financial arrangements for education and ‘Validation of Prior Learning’;
9. Development of an individual right for portfolio-assessment and career-advice.

### **Terminology**

The international commonly used term for validating prior learning is Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL). The authorities, as well as the social partners and schools prefer this

term because this approach mainly focuses on the summative effects of recognizing and assessing prior learning. The most important element in an APL-strategy is the assessment of the competencies that are collected in a portfolio with the goal of getting exemptions or a diploma. The portfolio is in this context mainly a showcase of only the competencies that matter for the standard itself; all the other personal competencies are irrelevant. The choice for a specific standard is in practice more steered by the availability of an actual standard than by a free, personal choice. This is because most of the times a school - as the keeper of the standard(s) – tends to look more to the best chance of success when measured against any given standard than to the best match of a standard and personal ambitions. So, in effect, APL is more steered by standards, and as most standards are owned by schools (upper secondary and higher vocational levels) this shows that APL really is strongly steered by schools.

With Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) the primary focus lies on the identification and recognition of the competencies that someone might have obtained in any period in his/her life and in any kind of learning environment. In this context the portfolio consists of all personal learning experiences. Only after collecting all the relevant, personal competencies together with their proof, a choice is made by the person. In this way the personal ambitions are better articulated and depending on the personal goal a specific choice for the kind of accreditation or validation is made. RPL, therefore is more personal steered and might involve not only summative but also formative goals.

It is interesting to see that, in several countries – Switzerland, the Netherlands, Finland - a shift occurs in the focus of lifelong learning strategies from APL towards RPL. This is due to the growing awareness on the real learning problems, namely how to make people invest in themselves if the necessary infrastructure is available (funds, methods, instruments and functions). With RPL 'the job might be done' in a bottom-up way. RPL is more and more seen as the real matchmaker as a bottom-up steered approach to (lifelong) learning, compared to a more top-down strategy of APL.

When looking at both terms – RPL and APL - VPL stands for the process of Validation of Prior Learning (VPL). Validation goes a step further than accreditation and recognition since it means a validation (or valuation) of prior learning measured against any learning objective and not just formalized standards; it can cover for instance also a validation for the sole aim of self-validation or justification of an activity. VPL therefore is covering both the formalized, top-down orientation of APL as well as the bottom-up process of RPL. So, VPL can be seen as the real designation of developing, implementing and embedding lifelong learning in society, in the Learning Society so to say; VPL is for the sake of citizens as well as providers and organisations (profit, non-profit, voluntary work, labour-agencies, communities, etc). VPL is able to manage in a flexible way the diversity of goals all these parties and partners have in making use of lifelong learning strategies.

Competence is a central concept in VPL. Without a good understanding of this concept little can be achieved with VPL. 'Competence' means having adequate knowledge of how

to act in a particular situation. Whether or not someone is competent becomes apparent based on how he/she acts (Lyotard 1988).

In other words, a competence is the sum of knowledge and skill: knowledge is 'the knowing' and skill is 'the acting'. A competence, then, encompasses knowledge and skill as well as the personal methods used in applying that skill. It is essentially based on personal attitudes and ambitions. For this reason, a competence value is only partially fixed, as this value is mainly personal. The way in which a competence reaches a particular, personal value is also a part of that competence. For that reason, I prefer Cedefop's definition, which states that a competence is an ability that extends beyond the possession of knowledge and skills. It includes: 1) cognitive competence; 2) functional competence; 3) personal competence; and 4) ethical competence ([www.cedefop.gr](http://www.cedefop.gr)). The 'personal competence' is particularly relevant, because it is this competence that 'colours' the generic description of a competence. It is only within this personal context that a competence can be identified, assessed, valued and developed (further).

Based on this concept of competence, VPL is particularly useful as an evaluation, not connected to the learning path, of the personal development of competencies. This perspective, however, reduces VPL to a kind of intake assessment. It also turns the individual into a passive learner. VPL's potential as a vision on personal development, however, as well as an instrument, is much larger than that. VPL needs to be used on a much larger scale, especially in approaches geared more towards the individual. After all, VPL can motivate the individual to take more initiatives in personal development. Educational institutions, companies and other organizations can then fine tune their educational and personnel policies in line with this.

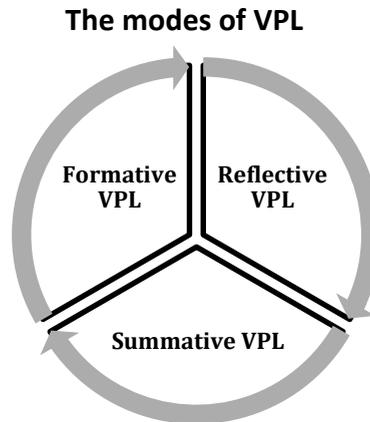
### Three approaches

In particular, VPL makes it possible for a person to make an inventory of his/her competencies, allowing those competencies to receive a value and to be recognized; it is not a direct requirement that development steps are taken instantly, as this is up to the individual to decide. Recognizing and placing value on competences is also known as the *passive* or *summative* VPL approach. When VPL also stimulates further learning – that is, places a value on competences – this is called *activating* or *formative* VPL. These are the three main streams within VPL. A third form is focused on the person him- or herself and can be considered as a reflective form of VPL in which the individual is undergoing a process of self-valuation.

The methodology for Validation of Prior Learning takes many shapes and destinations. These can all be captured in three main modes:

1. **Reflective VPL**, takes the whole learning biography of an individual as the focus for building up a portfolio and action plan. Only after this is done, the individual makes a choice on taking action: which standard to link to, which stakeholders to address, which learning goal, etc. A high level of (social) reflexivity can be defined by an individual shaping his/her own norms, desires and objectives. It refers to the notion of autonomy of the individual.

2. **Summative VPL**, building up a portfolio against a pre-set standard, with a one-dimensional goal; looking for access and exemptions.
3. **Formative VPL**, meeting up with a portfolio to a standard for deciding on further learning or formulating a career-step with the portfolio as a starting point.



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The essential difference between these approaches is that in a summative and formative VPL process the focus is on validating someone's development against a pre-set standard. Evidence for such a validation is collected in the form of 'a snapshot of someone's present status quo' through his/her diplomas, certificates, professional products, etc. The outcome of the VPL-process is official recognition for learning accomplishments within a qualification or certificate. The award is captured in exemptions or (sometimes) in full qualifications/certificates.

The formative process goes a step further than summative VPL. The objective is to further develop one's competence) on the basis of learning evidence and validated against a pre-set standard in learning (qualifications, certificates) and/or working (function profiles in systems for human resources management). In this sense, summative VPL can be seen as a part of formative VPL.

The reflective process is quite different from the other two forms. It is geared at enabling individuals to manage their own careers, articulate their own development needs and build up their own competences. Education and vocational training should respond to this, becoming more flexible and demand-driven. Formal systems such as qualification structures and vocational education will then have less of a prescriptive function in terms of personal development, and serve more as a reference framework and repertoire within which there is individual choice. These formal systems retain a function as pegs for defining the direction and level of personal development and the relevant external communication with employers, mediators, referrers, schools, etc.

### **From portfolio to *portfolio-loop***

The portfolio is the most important prerequisite for implementing VPL. Portfolios are used to plan, organize and document education, work samples, informal activities and skills. People can use portfolios to apply to school or training programs, get a job, get a higher salary, show transferable skills, track personal development or more holistically, answer the question who they are and what their ambitions can/may be.

In general there are three types of portfolio:

1. A dossier-portfolio is used to document proof for getting exemptions in a specific degree or qualification programme. The proof consists of professional products and behaviour results. This portfolio acts as a showcase for a summative APL-procedure. It is only filled with the necessary proof and is hardly steered by the candidate. Its nature is reflective, for the learning results that are of importance.
2. The development-portfolio focuses on broad, personal reflection. Its nature is reflective as well as prospective. It is filled with all relevant, lifewide proof of the candidate. Its nature is diagnostic for summative as well as for formative purposes. It is strongly steered and managed by the candidate (Tillema 2001).
3. The personal portfolio also aims at documenting learning results from the past. It can be used for any VPL-procedure and is highly (self-)reflective. The candidate first fills the portfolio with descriptions of his/her activities and achievements so far. Then he/she reflects on these activities by describing the personal competences that were necessary in the activity. This self-reflection can be strengthened by reflection from 'third parties'. The outcome of this process is a personalized portfolio that provides answers to questions like 'what are my strengths and weaknesses?', 'what are my key-qualities?', 'how can I build further on my personal achievements?', etc. Only then he/she might make up a personal action plan and decide to choose a specific developmental goal. Such a personal portfolio has a holistic character since it covers the person's lifespan and experiences regardless of external standards. (also see [www.ch-q.nl/english](http://www.ch-q.nl/english)).

By working with a portfolio people go through a cyclical process:

- Which of my competences are strong developed or weak?
- Which of my competences fit in with my career- or learning needs?
- How to show my value to others?
- How to develop myself further?

When asking yourself these questions by looking at the personal development-potential, people can decide which portfolio-type will meet their personal needs. In all cases, the portfolio is taken as a starting point for new learning issues from a VPL-embedded situation. The entire process of validation, then, begins and ends with the portfolio since the new learning or development results will be added to the original portfolio. This enriched portfolio might at the same time be the basis for new development steps and start a new VPL process. This is known as the 'portfolio loop' (Duvekot 2006, 2007).

## **The VPL-process**

VPL in general consists of five phases: commitment and awareness of the value of competencies, recognition of personal competencies, valuation and/or validation of these competencies, (advice on the) development of competencies and structurally embedding this competence-based approach into a personal or organisation steered and owned policy (Duvekot 2005). Together these five phases constitute the VPL-process:

### *Phase 1: Commitment and awareness*

An individual has to be aware of his/her own competencies; of the value, he/she is giving him/herself to these competencies and the value it has for others in certain contexts at certain moments. Being able to keep up your competencies in a 'made-to-measure way' is vital for this understanding. A competence is actually to know how to act in a certain way. Whether someone is competent becomes clear from his or her actions. Society has a major interest in capitalising on this, whether through formal learning pathways in the school system during certain periods in life or through Non-formal and informal pathways in other periods.

For organisations, it is vital to understand that investing in people means investing in the goals of the own organisation. This awareness should culminate in setting specific targets for the investment in individuals and the support the organisation can give to this *human resource development*.

This phase consists of two steps: raising awareness and setting the targets for VPL within the specific context. This phase is the critical success factor for VPL since if an organisation doesn't experience the necessity to (re)think its mission and connect this to the need to strengthen or start up a pro-active form of human resource management, the impact of VPL is less. In general, this phase takes as much time as the other four phases together!

### *Phase 2: Recognition*

Identifying or listing competencies is usually done with the help of a portfolio. Apart from a description of work experience and diplomas, the portfolio is filled with other evidence of competencies acquired. Statements from employers, professional products, references, papers or photos undeniably show the existence of certain competencies. The evidence can be aimed at the profession or position the VPL procedure is developed for. In other cases it can be an 'open' portfolio or a complete overview. Evidence is sometimes aimed at valuation, in other cases at personal profiling. The participant compiles the portfolio him/herself, with or without help.

This phase is made up of a preparatory and a retrospective step. The preparation aims at articulating the actual need for competencies in the organisation in the different function-profiles. In the retrospective step, the involved individuals fill in their portfolios and acquire the necessary proof of their learning in the (recent) past.

### *Phase 3: the valuation or assessment of competencies*

Then the content of the portfolio is being valued or assessed, when necessary, followed by an extra assessment. This usually takes place by observation during work or by means

of a criterion based interview. Assessors compare the competencies of an individual with the standard that has been set in the given context. That standard will be used to measure the qualities of the participant. His/her learning path followed is unimportant, only the results count. This second step results in either a validation on an organisational, sector or national level in the form of certificates, diplomas or career moves, or in a valuation in the form of an advice on career-opportunities.

This phase needs different steps:

- Setting the standard of the specific VPL-process. It can in principal be any standard that meets the needs of the individual and/or the organisation, e.g. a national or sector qualification-standard or an internal standard. Together with the standard a choice can be made of the way the assessment will take place;
- The valuation itself, being the assessment of the portfolio and valuing it with correspondence to the given standard and targets of the organisation;
- The validation of the learning evidence within the given standard.

After this phase, the retrospective part of the VPL-process is concluded. The next phases concentrate on the prospective power of VPL.

#### *Phase 4: the development plan*

This phase of the VPL procedure aims at the development of the individual by turning the validation and/or advice into a personal action plan. On the basis of the valued competencies and clarity about the missing competencies or available strong competencies, a personal development plan is made up. This plan is about learning activities that will be done in formal or non-formal learning environments, in work situations, during a change of position, by offering coaching or by creating an environment in which informal learning is stimulated.

This phase has two steps. First, a match should be made between the individual's development plan and the goals of the organisation. This match could be made by simply stating that any kind of individual learning is also for the benefit of the organisation. Mostly, however, the match will be agreed upon by making the personal development plan a formal part of the broader organisation plan.

Secondly, the actual learning or development of the individual will be started up. In this step, the individual learns/develops his or herself on a 'made-to-measure basis', which means learning/developing irrespective and independent of form, time, place and environment.

#### *Phase 5: structural implementation of VPL*

The last phase of the VPL-process focuses at the structural implementation of VPL in a personal strategy for updating the portfolio or in the human resource management (HRM) of an organisation. The results of a VPL-pilot have to be evaluated in order to show the way the implementation can take place on a 'made-to-measure basis'. An organisation should be able to use VPL structurally for the specific goals that had been set in the pilot. Any new goals should also be added easily to this new policy. The same goes for the reciprocity of setting learning goals by the individual him/herself in the dynamic learning society.

VPL offers a personal development-strategy in which the organisation-context and public/private services are crucial for keeping up with the speed of competence-development in the learning society. On the individual level this calls for filling in the five phases of VPL. The phases take in total ten steps as shown in the figure below.

| The process of 'Validation of Prior Learning' |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| Phase   | Step + question  | Action individual  |
| I.<br>Preparation                             | <b>1. awareness</b><br><i>Where and how did I learn so far?<br/>Which necessity is there for self-investment?</i>                            | Open mind to lifelong learning.<br>Inventory of personal learning wishes.<br>Start self-management of competences.                 |
|   | <b>2. setting targets</b><br><i>Which learning targets are relevant?</i>   | Self-assessment.<br>Personal SWOT-analysis.<br>Formulate learning targets.   |
| II.<br>Recognition                            | <b>3. setting a personal profile</b><br><i>how to determine the need for competences?</i>  | Writing a personal profile.<br>Choosing a portfolio-format.  |
|   | <b>4. retrospection</b> <i>how to describe and document learning outcomes/prior learning?</i>  | Filling in a portfolio.<br>If needed, portfolio-guidance.  |
| III.<br>Valuation & Validation                | <b>5. standard setting</b><br><i>what is the relevant standard related to the targets?</i>   | Choosing a standard to refer to.<br>Re-arranging the personal portfolio.<br>Self-assessment.<br>Inventory of career-opportunities. |
|   | <b>6. valuation</b><br><i>How to get valuated?</i>   | Valuation of the portfolio.<br>Getting advice on certification- and career opportunities.  |
|   | <b>7. validation</b><br><i>How to get validated?</i>   | Turning the advice into proper certification and career-evaluation.  |
| IV.<br>Development                            | <b>8. prospection</b><br><i>How to set up a personal development plan (PDP)?</i>   | Turning validation into a PDP for reasons of certification, employability, empowerment.<br>Arranging learning-made-to-measure.     |
|   | <b>9. implementing a PDP</b><br><i>Working on learning targets</i>   | Executing the PDP  |
| V.<br>Implementation                          | <b>10. Structural implementation</b><br><i>How did it go? If ok, how to embed VPL structurally in a personal lifelong learning strategy?</i> | Evaluation of the process.<br>Maintaining portfolio-documentation.   |

Source: Duvekot, 2005.

In the figure a few elements are crucial:

1. **Raising awareness** of the necessity and opportunities of lifelong learning for individuals in any given context is the heart of the process of validating/valuing prior learning. Without this, learning will remain school- or company-steered and cannot effectively be based on individual talents and ambition.
2. In Phase II **the portfolio** is introduced as the red thread in the process. After learning targets have been set, the portfolio is designed and filled; its content is assessed and an advice is added on possible qualification- and career-opportunities; it is subsequently enriched by learning-made-to-measure and finally, the starting point of a new process in which new learning targets can be formulated. The portfolio, so to say, is on the one hand both the starting as well as the end point of the individual learning process. On the other hand any end point is again the starting point of a new learning process. This is called a *portfolio-loop*.
3. In Phase III **self-assessment** is the crucial element because without this a person can only partially become co-maker of his/her personal development. A person needs to be focused on his/her own prior learning achievements before making a link with a pre-set standard in learning or working processes.

There are different methods available for self-assessment, such as the Swiss *CH-Q* instrument (Schuur et al, 2003). It is an integral system, consisting of methods for building a portfolio, (self-) assessment, career- & action-planning, quality-control and accompanying training programmes. In general methods like CH-Q aim at personal development or career-planning and/or creating flexibility and mobility of the individual learner to and on the labour-market. They create added value by revitalising individual responsibility or co-makemanship by:

- a. providing the basis for a goal-oriented development and career-planning,
  - b. the stimulation of personal development,
  - c. the support of self-managed learning and acting,
  - d. stimulating young and adults to document continuously their professional- and personal development.
4. **The role of the assessor** is vital for starting up personal development in any kind of form. Reliable assessment is the *bridgebuilder* between a portfolio, including a personal action plan, and the specific development steps advised by the assessor. In any given context, an assessment-policy has three functions: (1) raising levels of achievement, (2) measuring this achievement reliably and (3) organising the assessment cost-effectively.

Assessment in this broad context is the judgement of evidence submitted for a specific purpose; it is therefore an act of measurement. It requires two things: evidence and a standard scale. (Ecclestone, 1994). Evidence is provided with the portfolio (or showcase) of the candidate. The standard that will be met, depends on the specific objective of the candidate. This means that the role of the assessor is all the more crucial because this professional has to be flexible with regard to the many objectives in order to be able to provide a custom-oriented validation and/or valuation. On top of that the professional should be able to use dialogue-based

assessment forms. On the basis of the advice of such an assessor further steps for personal development will be set in motion.

The choice of a specific assessor role largely depends on the objective of the assessment, which can vary greatly. Assessments for formal recognition of competences with certificates or exemptions for accredited training programmes demand the involvement of an assessor from an institution offering competence-based accreditation and adequate measures to guarantee the quality of the assessor. Assessments for accrediting competences at the company or institution level or merely to acquire insight into someone's competences do not require the involvement of an institution offering competence-based certification. In these cases, the assessor is also often a colleague, supervisor or the individual himself.

In order to guarantee good 'quality' of the assessor on the one hand and prevent the rise of a new quality control-bureaucracy on the other hand, it is recommended to formulate a 'quality-light' procedure for validation-procedures. A further advantage of a 'quality-light' procedure is that it is cost-effective and more transparent to candidates.

Possibilities for organising 'quality-light' are:

- a. any assessor should first design and fill in his/her own portfolio and personal action-plan; only then they can be given entrance to assessor-trainings,
  - b. a professional register for assessors should guarantee their assessment-competences and professionalism,
  - c. every two years a new assessor accreditation should guarantee professionalism by ensuring assessor quality. Assessor quality can be maintained by means of refresher and updating courses. This new accreditation could be carried out by an official national agency, and tripartite governing (authorities and social partners),
  - d. quality of assessors implies being able to refer to a standard for assessors: this standard needs accreditation in a given national application (a role for the government).
5. Regarding the **development-steps** one might say that, when following the personalized path of VPL, lifelong learning is extended to a wider range of objectives, not only from learning to certification but also from learning to empowerment and employability. This calls for a strong involvement of the different stakeholders. Stakeholders that are involved in establishing systems for validation should not only be 'educationalists' and ministries but also employers and trade unions. VPL calls for a clear responsibility of not only certification-systems but also from human resource systems.
6. Proper **evaluation** and **feedback** finally is necessary to structurally embed the process into personal behaviour.

### **Supporting VPL in practice**

The central question of this chapter was 'how to activate VPL as an effective instrument for linking competences and credits in lifelong learning that appeals to citizens, strengthens their empowerment and also is beneficial to the other stakeholders in

society?'. With this question in mind, we aimed at showing the potential of VPL as a matchmaker between these stakeholders and the critical success factors for developing and implementing VPL in a diversity of contexts. In all contexts the VPL-process follows more or less the same phases and steps. This can help in demonstrating how and where to set up interventions for strengthening VPL as a matchmaker for the sake of creating time- and money-effective and - above all – efficient lifelong learning-strategies with a variety of learning objectives and on a win-win-win-basis for 'me', 'my organisation' and 'my learning provider'.

VPL can in this respect best be explained in the following statements:

- VPL shows the real human potential on the basis of the analysis and validation of personal competencies, documented in a portfolio.
- VPL is the process of assessing and valuating/validating personal competencies within a specific socio-economic context and offering a personal development strategy.
- Organisations benefit from VPL since individuals develop within their context.
- The VPL process in general consists of five phases: commitment and awareness of the value of one's competencies, recognition of personal competencies, valuation and/or validation of these competencies, (advice on the) development of one's competencies and finally structurally embedding this competence-based development process into a personal or organisation steered and owned policy.

Crucial in practising VPL is acknowledging the self-managing role of the 'empowered' learning individual in making lifelong learning a reality! The active participation of individuals in decisions about form and content of lifelong learning and the implementation of lifelong learning strategies from work-based or school/university-based is supported by VPL for many perspectives:

- 1 **... for improving opportunities for empowerment and deployment:** improved empowerment and deployment of individual talent is the most important motivation underlying VPL. It increases the opportunities for the individual in one's private life and on the labour market by highlighting the competences he or she already has and how these competences can be deployed and strengthened. This can apply both to those already in employment and to job-seekers. For employers and trade unions, the emphasis lies on improving the employability of employees within the working context.
- 2 **... for creating a more demand-led labour market:** improving the match between the learning system and the labour system is essential for the organisation of VPL. In order to improve deployability, 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 **... for making learning more flexible:** the recognition of informally and non-formally acquired competences will boost people's desire to keep on learning, i.e. will promote lifelong learning, since the accreditation of competences can lead directly to an award of or exemptions for 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 is learning.

- 4 **... for optimising other forms of learning:** other learning environments and forms of learning must be formulated and/or utilised more effectively, since VPL also shows 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.

So, there's a lot to gain with VPL. Let's find out into more detail how VPL works in practice. The framework can be used as a model for this purpose when describing and analysing practical case studies in a diversity of contexts: across sectors, types of organisations and learning environments; with different target groups, personal approaches and goals; in the diversity of dialogues between the learning individual, the learning system and the labour system.

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# Experience as the basis of eligibility for higher education

# 2

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Per Andersson

## Introduction

We live in an era when lifelong learning is seen as necessary, inevitable, and – not the least – valuable. The value of learning from experiences in varying contexts is for example expressed through a growing interest in validation or recognition of prior learning. Nevertheless, formal education is still important for creating learning opportunities as well as providing formal qualifications that are required in many sectors of the working life. One point where prior learning and formal education intersect is the access to education. Here, questions are raised concerning what knowledge and experiences are necessary or desirable when entering a certain educational level and programme, and how those most likely to succeed should be selected.

Widening access to higher education is one of many efforts that have been promoted through different types of validation of prior learning, and where questions like those mentioned above have come to the fore. This chapter concerns access to higher education for adults who lack the formal qualifications from secondary education to be eligible for higher education, and the discussion is illustrated by examples of initiatives in the Swedish educational system, particularly a scheme that granted eligibility mainly based on working-life experiences.

## Routes into higher education

The traditional route into higher education is, at least in Sweden, a theoretically oriented programme in upper secondary school that prepares exclusively for studying in higher education. From 1994 all programmes in upper secondary school have been three years long, and during the period 1994–2011 the vocational programmes in upper secondary school also enabled basic eligibility for higher education, something which illustrates the ambitions in Sweden to widening access. However, the latest reforms in upper secondary school mean that vocational programmes no longer guarantee this basic eligibility. The dividing line between vocational programmes and programmes explicitly preparing for studying in higher education was made clearer, and students in vocational programmes now have to take additional courses (during the programme, or afterwards in adult education) to be eligible. One, unforeseen, effect of this latest reform was that the vocational programmes became less attractive among young people, who apparently want to have a route into higher education.

This latest reform in Swedish upper secondary school will not be the focus of this chapter, but it illustrates that the questions of widening access or not, and of eligibility, are important in the Swedish system. In the late 1960s and the 1970s the situation was different. Fewer young people entered upper secondary school than today, and few adults had had this experience. Furthermore, vocational programmes were shorter and gave no eligibility to higher education. Against this backdrop, the discussion on widening access to higher education was developing in Sweden, as in other countries. Establishing formal municipal adult education in the late 1960s was one initiative that among other things promoted adults' route into higher education. Two other initiatives were the introduction of the Swedish Scholastic Aptitude Test, SweSAT, and the 25:4 scheme for eligibility. SweSAT was developed as a selection instrument for adults who lacked grades from upper secondary level, as the grade point average was and is the most common selection instrument. The test has been developed since then and is still in use, but today there are no age restrictions, which means that it is an alternative selection instrument open for all applicants. The 25:4 scheme, which is now abandoned, gave basic eligibility for those who were at least 25 years old and had at least 4 years of work experiences (initially 5 years were required, and it was then called the 25:5 scheme). In addition to these requirements of years of experiences there were also requirements concerning grades in Swedish and English on upper secondary level, thus additional educational requirements but much more limited as compared to a programme on upper secondary level.

### **The admissions system in Sweden**

To clarify the context of this discussion, the higher education admissions system in Sweden will now be described more in detail. It is a two-step system of firstly, eligibility and secondly, selection. Eligibility is assessed through varying measures that act as a threshold to ensure that potential students have the ability to take the course or programme in question. There is a basic general eligibility requirement in relation to higher education as well as additional requirements of specific eligibility for specific courses/programmes. If there are more eligible applicants than places, a selection process is undertaken based in part on other measures, mainly grades and the scholastic aptitude test.

There are different ways to acquire basic eligibility for higher education in Sweden. As mentioned, the traditional track is upper secondary school, where young people normally study from the ages of 16 to 19. There are other opportunities for adult students, which act as alternatives or supplements to 'half' an upper secondary school education. Municipal adult education provides formal education with courses equivalent to those of upper secondary school. Folk high schools are adult education institutions that provide non-formal education; their general courses of study could also provide eligibility for higher education. A foreign education could also secure eligibility.

Moreover, it should be noted that Sweden differs from many other countries in that there is no separate provision of adult and continuing education within higher education. Everyone, independent of age, could apply for and participate in the same courses and programmes, but there are still part-time and distance courses/programmes that could be more attractive to older students. Another factor that should be mentioned, even if it is not part of the admission system *per se*, is the fact that there are no student fees in Sweden, except for students from outside the EU. Thus, after admission, higher education is free for all Swedes independent of age, and there is also a system of study subsidies and loans for students to cover their cost of living.

### **The 25:4 scheme**

As described above, the 25:4 scheme (initially 25:5) was introduced in the 1970s as a measure to widen access to higher education by providing a different basis for eligibility. Since a policy was put in place in July 2008, it has no longer been possible to acquire eligibility through this route, but it was possible for a person who had achieved 25:4 eligibility by the end of June 2008 to use it until the end of 2011. The scheme has now been replaced by a different system, where an individual assessment of applicants' 'real [actual] competence' could result in basic eligibility.

It should be noted that the decision to introduce and establish the 25:4 scheme was made by the left wing, and widening access was emphasised in the proposal. The goals were to promote social justice and equal opportunities and to improve higher education by fostering a higher degree of diversity among the student population (Andersson and Fejes, 2005; Ministry of Education, 1970, 1974) and 'intergenerational social mobility' (Kim, 1982). Notably, the original idea actually came from the right wing, with a different motivation. The main argument from the right wing was work-life related, with the goal of improving opportunities for the competence development of employees through shorter work-related courses in higher education (Kim, 1982). The decision to remove the scheme was made by the present right-wing majority, as part of a policy to increase direct transition from upper secondary school and reduce a problem of reduced admission of younger applicants.

However, an analysis of the whole population of applicants for higher education autumn 2008 shows that the scheme was mainly a route into higher education for adults who applied for shorter, part-time courses. Thus, older applicants did not 'take' open spots on longer programmes at the 'expense' of younger applicants. Equally, that analysis shows that the scheme fulfilled both the initial right- and the left-wing ambition at least to some extent – it was widening access to higher education *and* providing opportunities for competence development among employees (Andersson, 2013).

### **Eligibility and selection instruments as validation of prior learning**

The initiatives of SweSAT and the 25:4 scheme could be seen as instruments for a general validation of prior (experiential) learning. The scholastic aptitude test gives a general measure of the ability to study in higher education, and no prior education is

required to take the test, which means that any learning in any life context could be contributing to the result and therefore be granted recognition. The 25:4 scheme valued life and work experiences in general independent of the contents of experience, that is, independent of the type of experiences, work tasks etc. This general approach is still in use when it comes to SweSAT and the selection process. But concerning eligibility the 25:4 scheme has, as mentioned, been abandoned. The new alternative route of 'real competence' takes a more specific approach to eligibility. In this case, the applicant has to provide evidence that s/he has the ability to take a course or programme in higher education, and the university or university college has to make an individual assessment of this evidence, of the 'real competence' that the applicant claims. Thus, this new alternative with its specific approach has similarities with approaches that were applied elsewhere, for example in the USA in the days when the more general 25:4 scheme was introduced in Sweden (Abrahamsson, 1989).

### **Alternative solutions**

The description above covers particular measures that have been taken in the Swedish system. Of course, this is not the only possible solution. On the contrary, there are varying approaches that are in use, or could be seen as possible options. Therefore it is worth considering some alternatives.

On the one hand, why should there be alternative routes to higher education at all? Is it not enough for programmes in upper secondary school to target further studies, possibly with eligibility options in vocational programmes and courses in formal adult education as a complement? This could be an option, at least in the Swedish system where most young people go to upper secondary school today. However, there are drop-outs that might benefit from alternative routes. There is also the group of immigrants who might have the 'real competence' required in higher education even if they lack qualifications that are given recognition in their new country. In such cases, alternative routes could make their educational trajectories shorter, something that they themselves - as well as society - could benefit from, in terms of a higher degree of utilising competence in working life.

On the other hand, why should there be restriction at all when it comes to access? Free access where everyone could have a try, and where the selection takes place through pass/fail in the initial courses, would be a way to give recognition to prior learning among those who succeed, independent of background. However, there are some problems with such a system. Firstly, a high degree of flexibility with resources – teachers and money – would be necessary, and to make such free entry possible in Swedish higher education as a whole would require a major change in the system. But – it could be possible in some sectors, where numbers of applicants do not exceed number of study places, as can often be the case today when eligibility is required. Secondly, there is the problem of efficiency in the educational system. Probably neither institutions nor students would benefit from a system where it could be that a high number of students enter a programme 'in vain', when the result is that they fail and are not able to

fulfil their longer-term plans. However, a major objection to this second argument is the difficulty to predict study success with general measures in relation to specific courses and programmes. The ability to study could be assessed, and prior learning in the specific subject area could be assessed – but it is not always easy to assess and make a selection based on the applicants’ motivation in relation to the course. Equally, interest and motivation are crucial factors when it comes to the willingness to put effort into studies and to succeed and fulfil your life plans.

### The relevance of the question

Another aspect of this discussion is the relevance of the question concerning admission of older students to higher education. It might be relevant today, or major changes in systems and study patterns might be required to make it relevant, depending on the national context. In Sweden, the discussion is relevant in the present situation. Sweden has a relatively high number of students who have a background in working life before entering higher education, and university students are of various ages. Actually, the majority of university students are 25 years or older (table 1). Different initiatives have been taken to widen participation in higher education, which have been successful in this sense. However, this success has later been seen as a problem, as more older students means less younger students – with a fixed frame of available places – and the present policy has increasingly put focus on direct or at least quick transition from upper secondary level into higher education.

*Table 1. Swedish population 15–64 years, participation in higher education in autumn 2008, distributions of age groups and women/men.*

| <i>Age group</i>         | <i>% of women</i> | <i>% of men</i> | <i>% of all students</i> |
|--------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| 15–24                    | 42.3              | 48.9            | 44.9                     |
| 25–34                    | 31.5              | 35.5            | 33.1                     |
| 35–44                    | 16.1              | 9.8             | 13.6                     |
| 45–54                    | 7.9               | 4.0             | 6.4                      |
| 55–64                    | 2.2               | 1.7             | 2.0                      |
|                          | 100.0             | 100.0           | 100.0                    |
|                          | <b>Women</b>      | <b>Men</b>      | <b>All students</b>      |
| <b>N</b>                 | 197,153           | 128,316         | 325,469                  |
| <b>% of all students</b> | 60.6              | 39.4            | 100.0                    |

*Note: Participation rates for autumn 2008 are chosen to correlate with the empirical study presented below, where a survey was distributed to a sample of applicants for courses starting that semester.*

Internationally there has also been a debate on lifelong learning and opportunities to increase adults’ involvement in higher education (see, e.g., Davies, 1995; Mark, Pouget and Thomas, 2006; Osborne, 2003). Widening access is seen as a tool for inclusion as

well as social and economic development. In this context, where Sweden has a tradition of inclusiveness in education, this chapter will discuss a measure for inclusion which has now been abandoned, a decision that could mean reduced access for adults in Swedish higher education.

### **Barriers to participation**

Thus, this chapter concerns adults' opportunities to participate in education, which is related to a case from the practice of Swedish higher education. A useful concept in this context is 'barrier'. Cross (1981) discusses three types of barrier to participation in education: institutional, situational, and dispositional.

*Institutional* barriers are related to the educational institution and its way of organising the provision of education. Certain models of organisation could act as barriers towards participation of certain groups. For example, the form of instruction in terms of distance courses vs. on-campus courses could influence participation. The system of admission with requirements of eligibility and selection instruments could also act as an institutional barrier, depending on how it is constructed and what the ambitions are for widening participation.

*Situational* barriers concern the life situation of the individual, where family, work, economy, place of residence and so on. could influence the opportunities to participate in education. When it comes to the admissions requirements, the situational barriers could, for example, have influence on the opportunities for adults to fulfil the requirements. Here, an institutional system where prior experiential learning could be granted recognition might – in the life situation of an adult with family, and the necessity to earn your living – make it easier to fulfil these requirements than if extensive courses on secondary level are necessary to become eligible for higher education.

*Dispositional* barriers refer to the disposition of the individual concerning participating in education, when it comes to interest, motivation, attitudes and so on. Here, a system that widens access might have influence on the dispositions – lower institutional barriers probably make motivation and attitudes more positive and therefore also make the dispositional barriers lower.

### **A study focusing the 25:4 scheme**

The results presented in the latter part of this chapter are based on a survey. The population to which the survey was distributed comprised those who had applied for higher education in Sweden to start a course or programme in autumn 2008, and who, according to the register of applications, had basic eligibility only through the 25:4 scheme – 7,682 individual applicants (2.7 % out of totally 288,986 applicants, see Andersson, 2013). In this population, a sample of 1,000 applicants was targeted to whom the survey was distributed as a postal survey. The response rate after two reminders was 51.8 %. The survey was distributed three years after the admission round in question, which means that data were produced in autumn 2011. It should also be noted that the

survey was printed in Swedish, and the items presented here have been translated to English.

Background data from registers were employed as a tool in designing the data collection as well as to provide additional data in the analysis. Firstly, data from a register of applications were used as a basis for identifying the population of 25:4 applicants. Secondly, register data concerning age are used as a basis for comparisons. Here, three categories are applied: below 38, 38–44, and older than 44.

The printed survey was distributed by Statistics Sweden (SCB), which provided anonymised data where distributions based on age groups were included. Furthermore, the results were calibrated by SCB, that is, in the results compensation has been given for an estimated skew in distributions based on drop out in relation to background data for the population.

Finally, the rationale for selecting the cohort of applicants for autumn 2008 was that this was the last admission round when the 25:4 scheme was still fully in use. That is, later on, applicants could not qualify for such eligibility. Nevertheless, those who had the 25:4 eligibility could still use it for another three-and-a-half years, which means that it is unlikely that the decision to abandon the scheme would have had a decisive influence on the application patterns at that moment.

### **Experiences of the 25:4 applicants**

The results will show patterns of application, admittance, participation, completion of studies, and drop-out, in the group of 25:4 applicants. Particularly, applicants' experiences of choice and drop-out are focused upon. For example, 88 % of these applicants were admitted to their first choice, which means that *eligibility*, rather than the selection process, was central for these applicants to be admitted. Additionally, it is shown how the importance of a course, the motivation for participation, is influenced by its value in terms of work-life opportunities but also how individual interest in a certain knowledge area, and family situation, influence the choices of the applicants.

### **Admission**

According to the responses from the survey, these applicants were successful in the admission process. 87 % answer that they were admitted in the first admission round, and another 7 % were admitted later in the process. In the application, the applicants could apply for a number of ranked alternatives, and they could be admitted to one or more (depending of study pace) alternatives. Among those who were admitted, 94 % were admitted to their first choice (including 6 % of them who were also admitted to a lower rated alternative). Those younger than 38 years were admitted to the first choice to a somewhat lower degree (91 % of those admitted). Overall, this means that, as mentioned, 88 % of the 25:4 applicants were admitted to their first choice – 94 % were admitted, and 94 % of them (which makes 88 % of the population) to the first alternative.

Furthermore, the alternatives comprise longer study programmes as well as shorter courses. 42 % answered that they were admitted only to a longer study programme, 51 % were admitted to one or more shorter courses, and 6 % were admitted both to a programme and to one or more course(s). Here there are interesting differences concerning age – 58 % of those younger than 38 years were admitted to a programme, 34 % to one or more courses, and 8 % to programme *and* course(s), while among those over 44 years only 22 % were admitted to a programme, 74 % to one or more courses, and 2 % to programme *and* course(s).

Another variation in the choice between different offerings is the study pace, where there are full- and part-time alternatives among programmes as well as among shorter courses. Here, the result shows that 56 % were admitted to full-time studies and 42 % to part-time studies. We can also see that the age difference is notable – 79 % of those below 38 were admitted to full-time studies, but only 26 % of those over 44. The form of instruction of the programme/course varies too when it comes to distance or on-campus studies. 36 % were mainly admitted to distance studies and 62 % to on-campus studies. The share of distance studies is notably lower among those younger than 38 (26 %).

### **Entering – Drop-out – Completion**

A further is that the answers show that 56 % of those admitted had finished their studies after three years. 8 % never started the course/programme, and 9 % had dropped out. 25 % had not finished yet – 12 % because of the length of the programme meant that it was still running, and 13 % even if the course/programme formally should have been finished with a normal study pace. The length of the programme was a more common reason for not having finished among those under 38 years, which confirms that they applied for longer programmes than older applicants. Those over 44 years old had the highest completion rate (64 %), but also the highest rate of not even starting the course (10 %). That is, a significant number of the older applicants never start the course, but if they start they are more likely to finish – the latter probably related to applying for comparably short courses that are easier to complete.

### **Application patterns**

Even if the application round for autumn 2008 was chosen in this study, this does not mean that this was the only time when the individual in the cohort had applied for higher education. Therefore, the ‘trajectory’ of the cohort will include the history of earlier as well as later applications.

71 % in the cohort from the autumn round of 2008 had also applied for higher education *before* autumn 2008, and 47 % of them more than once. Here, there is also a significant difference related to age – the younger applicants (below 38) had less frequently applied more than once before and more often never before, while the older applicants (over 44) showed the opposite pattern. 61% of those who had applied earlier had been admitted and finished their studies at least once before autumn 2008, while 12 % had

started but not finished, and 10 % had started but dropped out. Here, it is older applicants who have finished at the highest level.

Equally, 59 % had applied again, one or more times, *after* autumn 2008. 62 % of those who had applied again had only applied for shorter courses after autumn 2008, 17 % only for programme(s), and 19 % to both types of studies. Those older than 44 years had mainly applied for shorter courses (81 % had only done this). On the other hand, younger applicants had applied for shorter courses at a lower level. 50 % of those who had applied again had been admitted, started, and finished the studies (in at least one case), and another 26 % had started but not finished yet. Another 15 % had been admitted but never started (10 %) or had dropped out (5 %).

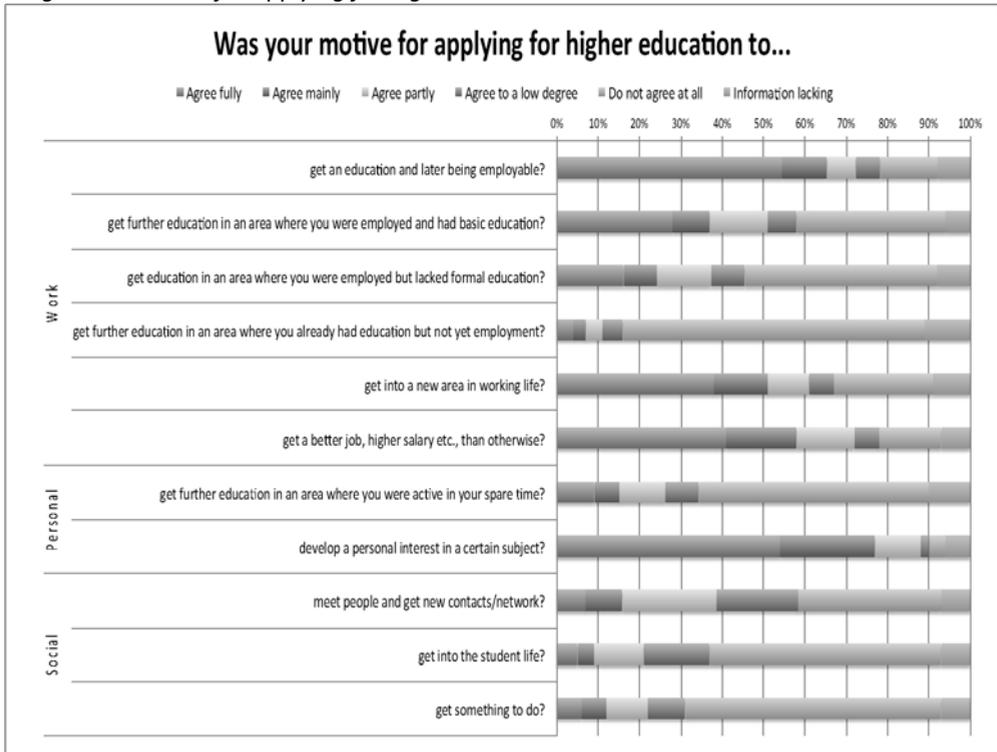
Thus, a number of applicants have applied more than once. Nevertheless, 24 % of the 25:4 applicants indicated that they only had applied *once*, for studies starting autumn 2008. The most common pattern of application was to apply for new courses when prior courses were finished (52 %). This was particularly common among those over 44 years (59 %). For the remaining 24 % of the whole group, 10 % had applied more than once to the same or a similar course to be admitted to what they really wanted to study, 6 % applied for other courses when they did not like or feel comfortable with the course where they had been admitted, and 2 % applied for other courses when they were not admitted to their first-hand choice. The internal drop out was 6 %.

### **Motives for applying**

The applicants were also asked to assess to what extent a number of factors were motives for them to apply for higher education in general (figure 1) and to apply for a certain study programme or course (figure 2). The general factors have been categorised as being mainly work-related, personal, or social, and the more specific factors have been categorised as being mainly institutional, situational, or dispositional. As presented above, these latter categories are applied particularly in relation to barriers, but they were useful here to understand motives, even if the categorisation could have been made differently depending on how the factors are interpreted.

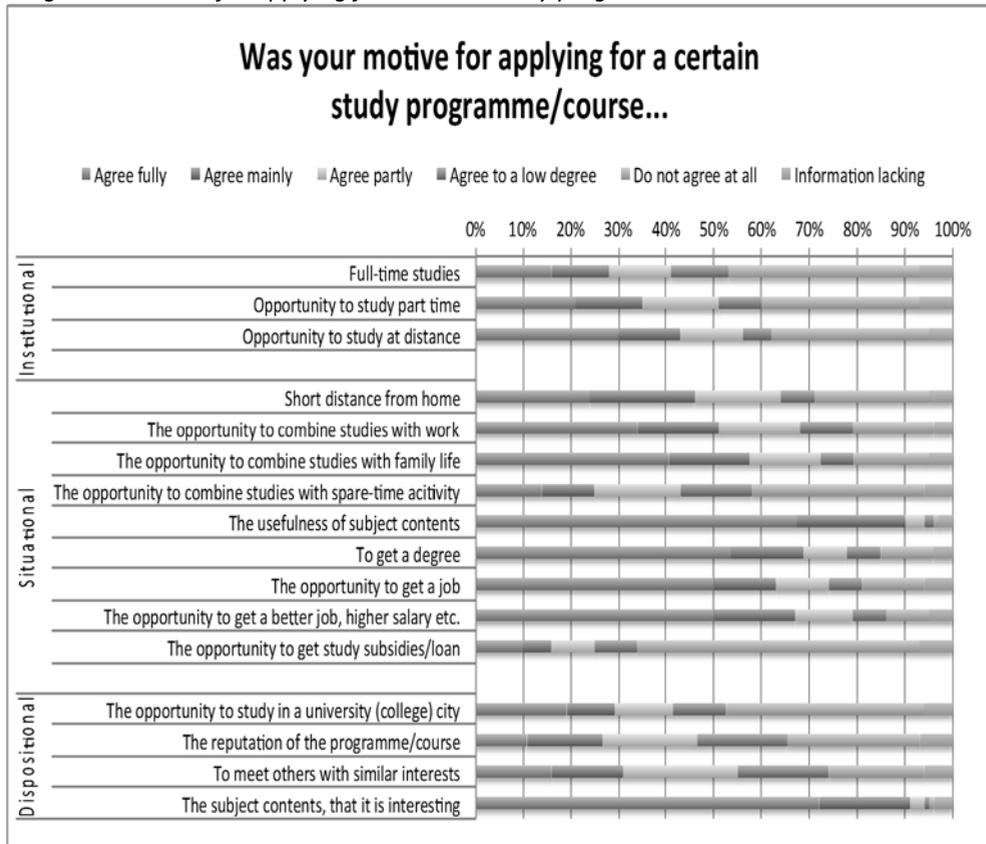
Here we can see that the most important motive for applying in general, according to the survey, is a personal interest in a certain subject, and the second most important motive is getting an education in order to become more employable. The motives that are indicated as most important thereafter are also work related, but rather with a focus on change in the work situation and conditions – to get into a new area in working life, get a better job, and a higher salary and so on. It should be noted that getting an education and becoming employable is particularly important among younger applicants compared to older applicants – 80 % of those below 38 agree fully or mainly, and only 3 % of them do not agree at all, while among those over 44 only 43 % agree fully or mainly, while 30 % do not agree at all.

Figure 1. Motives for applying for higher education.



Concerning motives for a certain programme or course (figure 2), we can see that the content of the course is in focus. A 'dispositional' motive, the interest in the subject, is most important here too, but a number of 'situational' motives generally seem to be important to understand the choice – particularly the usefulness of the subject contents (in a certain situation), to get a degree (valuable in a certain situation) or a better work situation. However, the direct economic aspect (study subsidies/loans) is not important, and neither are spare-time activities.

Figure 2. Motives for applying for a certain study programme or course.

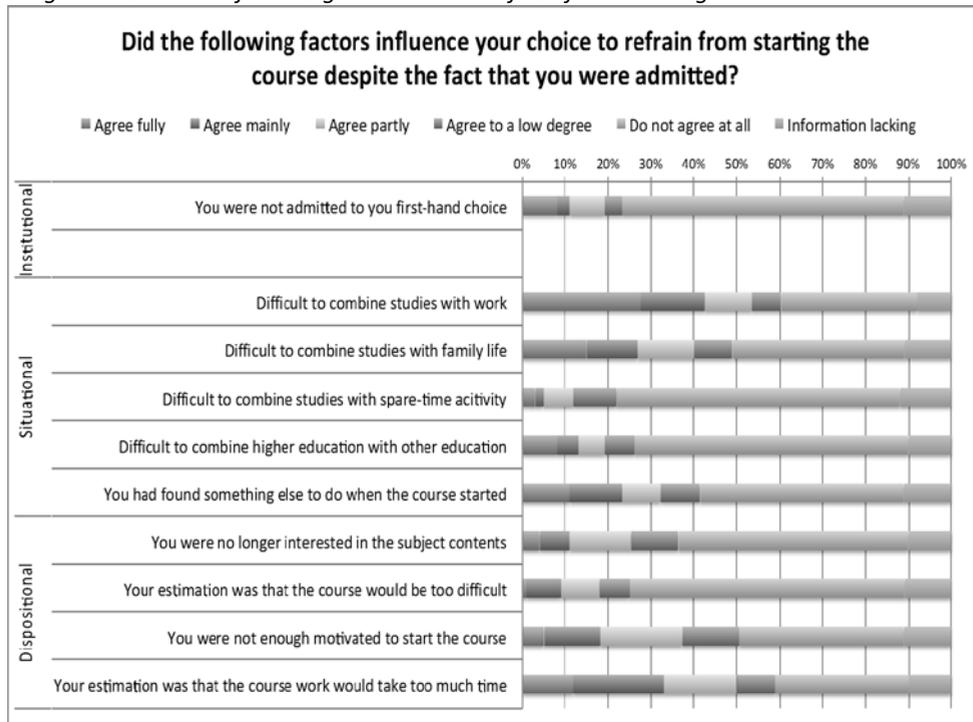


**Barriers**

Another question was whether the applicants had ever refrained from starting a course even if admitted, and in this case the distribution was even – 49 % had done this and 48 % had not. Here the concept of ‘barrier’ is more useful in an attempt to understand reasons for refraining from starting a course. The respondents valued a number of factors that could influence the choice to refrain, factors that are categorised as representing institutional, situational, or dispositional barriers. We can see (figure 3) that the factors marked as most influential (respondent agrees fully or mainly) relate to time – difficulties to combine with work (situational) and the estimation that studies would take too much time (dispositional). The estimation of a course taking too much time could also be interpreted as a situational factor, but here that aspect is covered by the items focusing on problems to combine higher education and specific types of activities. Thus, the ‘taking too much time’ factor is firstly seen as an expression of a disposition, based on personal values and priorities, where putting time into studying is a choice that it is possible to make. The other factors that ‘stand out’ are difficulties of combining studies with family life, having found something else to do, and lack of motivation.

That the applicant has found something else to do is categorised here as expressing a situational barrier, which put focus on the choice to refrain because of a certain life situation. However, this could also be viewed as a dispositional barrier, as it is likely that this choice is also influenced by attitudes towards the different alternatives.

Figure 3. Barriers influencing the choice to refrain from starting a course.



Among those who had refrained, 67 % indicated that they had done so due to difficulties to combine studies with other activities (work, family, spare time, other studies), and 29 % had not. Particularly those in the ages 38-44 years had done this (73 %). In this group that had refrained due to difficulties in combining studies with other activities, we can see (figure 4) that the most common reason for this, of those that were included in the items, was institutional – the study pace. But also the dispositional factor, the importance of the course for the individual, is more important than those factors related to distance (study form and distance from home).

Figure 4. Barriers influencing the choice to refrain from starting a course due to difficulties in combining studies with other activities.

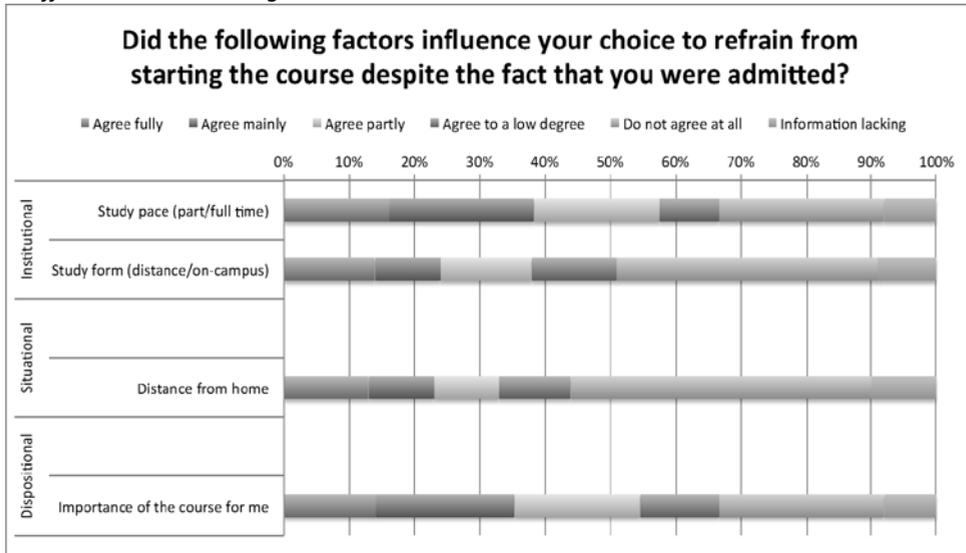
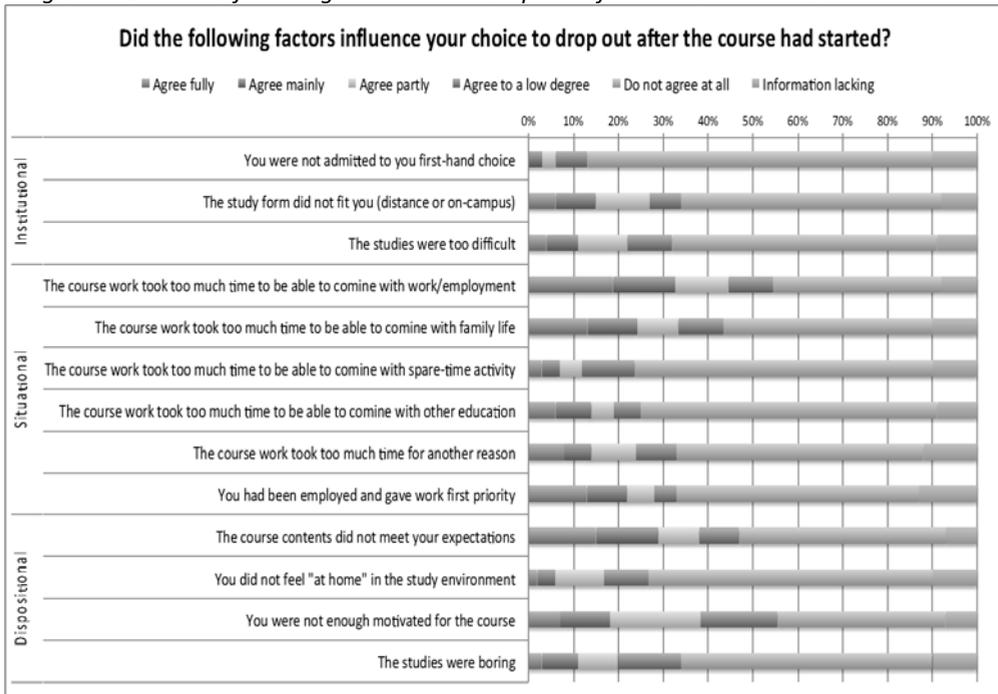


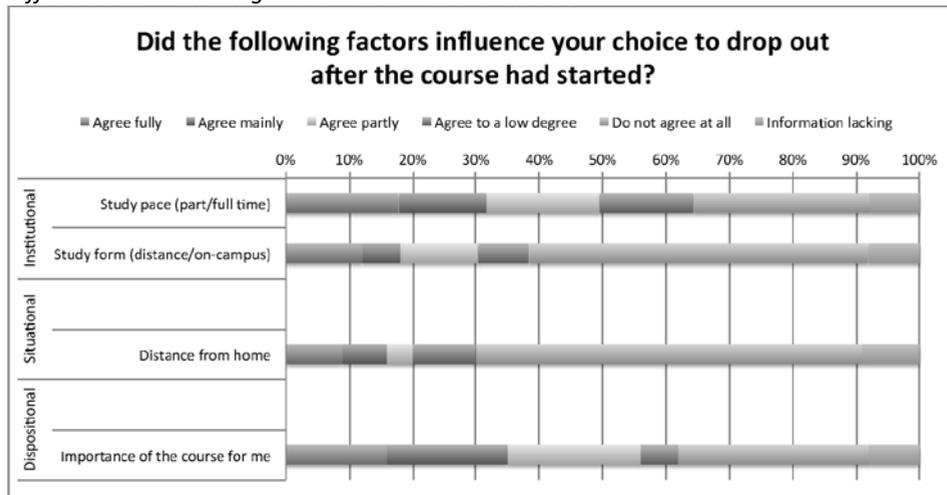
Figure 5. Barriers influencing the choice to drop out after a course had started.



Similarly to the question regarding whether or not the applicants had ever refrained from starting a course even if admitted, the distribution also occurred even when it came to whether or not the applicants had ever dropped out from a course after it had started (50 % had, 47 % had not). The choice to drop out is related to a number of different factors expressing institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers (figure 5). Similarly to the motives for refraining from studying, the most influential factors concerning drop out are related to work and family life – situational barriers. But the other factors that ‘stand out’ are dispositional – that the course contents did not meet expectations, and lack of motivation.

It should be noted that here too the relationship of the items to the three types of barriers is not evident. To give work first priority is seen as expressing a situational barrier, but similarly to when an applicant refrains from a study place having found something else to do, this could also be seen as dispositional factor, if it is a matter of attitude towards alternative rather than an actual life situation that is decisive. If the studies are seen as ‘too difficult’, this could also be a dispositional factor – the categorisation here as an institutional factor put focus on actual difficulty rather than experienced difficulty. Finally, not feeling ‘at home’ is described as a dispositional factor, but there is also an institutional dimension as the feeling is related to a specific, actual, institutional context.

Figure 6. Barriers influencing the choice to drop out after a course had started, due to difficulties in combining studies with other activities.



Among those who had dropped out, 57 % indicated that they had done this due to difficulties to combines studies with other activities (work, family, spare time, other studies), and 39 % had not. The respondents who had dropped out due to difficulties to combine studies with other activities were also asked to assess some of the factors

influencing this (figure 6). Here we can see a similar pattern as for the same question concerning refraining from starting for the same reasons (figure 4): the study pace and the importance of the course are the most influential factors.

### **Discussion**

What does this analysis tell us about how value is assigned to experience in this alternative route to higher education? Actually, we have seen that almost 90 % of the 25:4 applicants were admitted to their first-hand choice. This means that eligibility must have been central for them to be admitted. Thus, the 25:4 scheme was valuing general experiences as relevant in terms of being prepared for higher education. In a system where formal education is an important part of lifelong learning opportunities, such schemes for valuing experiences have an important role in widening access and lowering barriers to participation. However, the more specific approach that often is present in approaches to validation (cf. Andersson and Fejes, 2005), as in the Swedish assessment of 'real competence', which has a similar yet different starting point. In such approaches, it is most likely that the demands become more convergent, with the result that variation among students and intergenerational social mobility are reduced.

The choice between different alternatives is a matter of policy concerning access. The degree of variation among students, which depends on the access policy, also has influence on pedagogy in higher education. If the variation is broader, the teachers have a broader spectrum of experiences to use and include as starting points for teaching and the development of students' understanding. The other side of the coin could of course be that a broader variation in study tradition among students means a different challenge to teachers than teaching a more homogenous group of 'traditional' students.

Another aspect of the choice concerning policy is the matter of resources. How many resources should be put into a system for assessment of eligibility and selection, as compared with resources for teaching? This is a factor that should be included in the choice between more general, standardised, approaches to valuing experiences, and more specific approaches that require specific and maybe time-consuming assessment methods.

We can also see that the use of the 25:4 scheme varied between applicants, with certain differences depending on age. This shows that 'non-traditional' applicants and students (in terms of age) is not a homogenous group. On the contrary, the applicants that were included in the 25:4 group, who are often classified as 'adults', represent a broad age spectrum, where the relation towards higher education, as expressed in their application and study patterns, varies significantly. On the one hand, 'younger' adults more often apply for longer programmes, a pattern which indicates that they prepare for a (new) career in working life, with the ambition of entering a profession that requires training in higher education. 'Older' adults, on the other hand, more often apply for and study shorter courses, generally provided as part-time and/or distance courses.

These differences are also reflected in the patterns concerning drop-out and completion, where younger applicants have higher drop-out and lower completion rate. This is reasonable in relation to the fact that they more often applied for longer programmes that requires more extensive study efforts. Furthermore, this pattern is confirmed by the answers in relation to 'barriers' that influence the choice to refrain from studying or to drop out, where the time factor seems to be decisive, expressed particularly in the problems when it comes to combine studying with work and family life. These are factors that are most likely to have a stronger influence when it comes to studying longer programmes, and particularly when the students are in the age where family life more often includes small children.

When it comes to the application patterns, we can also see that most applicants apply more than once. A focus on one specific admission round does not mean that this is the only experience of application for most applicants in the 'cohort'. Rather, it is notable that as many as 24 % answer that this particular round was the only time they had applied, which indicates that there could be barriers towards recurrent education in part of this group. Here, we do not have comparable figures for other groups of applicants, but it would be interesting to make, for example, such comparisons between different groups of applicants with varying backgrounds.

Generally, the question of access of 'non-traditional' groups to higher education is an important part of policy and practice in relation to lifelong learning, and a number of central and more specific questions are raised. Who should get access? What should the requirements be? What background is valuable for a student in higher education? To what extent should the focus be on quick entry for young students, and/or access for older students? What are the barriers that should be taken into account when targeting different groups? Furthermore, this chapter also shows that in a discussion based on such questions, 'adults' should not be seen as a homogenous group with similar ambitions and similar barriers when it comes to participation in education. The influence of the life situation, with family and so on, varies depending on for example age. The motives for studying also vary, from the choice of a new career to competence development within a professional area, as well as the option of studying a course based on a personal, non-work-related interest. Moreover, the question of eligibility is relevant in all these cases, as it is a matter of who is and who should be seen as suitable for entering higher education – which in turn provides the conditions for how higher education should be developed.

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## Introduction

South Korea has a high proportion of young people progress into tertiary education (OECD, 2011). Between the 1960s and 1990s, South Korea achieved an extremely high rate of growth both in terms of economic growth per capita and high educational participation rates in higher education (HE). According to the OECD, South Korea has one of the highest rates of progression from secondary schooling to tertiary and higher education (HE). Nevertheless, despite such a highly educated young population, South Korea has one of the highest youth unemployment rate among the OECD member states (Park, 2011).

College entrants have strong literacy and numeracy skills, as indicated by the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) results. South Korea also performs very well in terms of educational equity (OECD, 2010). The process of policymaking is dynamic and aims to address many key challenges, as illustrated by the recent introduction of formula funding in junior colleges, measures concerning poor performing post-secondary institutions and the ongoing development of the national competency standards. The post-secondary education system is, in principle, well-articulated, allowing students to continue from vocational education and training (VET) programmes to a university degree with recognition of the credits obtained – although some challenges remain, such as the co-ordination of curricula.

However, various indicators suggest that there is a mismatch in terms of skills and education between post-secondary VET provision and labour market needs (Kis and Park, 2012). While some of the origins of this mismatch are rooted in culture and tradition, some features of the South Korean education and training system also contribute to the challenge. Links between the VET system and industry and business are still weak, including at national policy making level. This makes it harder to develop policies that help the VET system to meet rapidly changing labour market needs.

There have been disparities in terms of languages among the stakeholders such as industries, HE institutions, vocational training providers, government branches, and, above all, individual learners. Despite the high rate of entrance to HE and the high ranking of student performance in an international competition such as PISA, the private

sector has not been satisfied with the results of formal education: the performance of newly graduated workforce. The government and HE institutions do not seem to understand what labour market requires of new entrants to the workforce. Individual workers do not have any point of reference against which to measure their quality in terms of the demands of industry (Park, 2011).

The schism between the labour market and HE creates societal instability and unemployment and ironically, the skill mismatch forces young people to seek more education while employers have to invest more in on-the-job training for new recruits. Higher education institutions (HEIs) do not seem to signal skill levels of the graduates adequately to employers, partly due to the lack of rigorous assessments of students before graduation. In general, the links between vocational education in HEIs and the labour market are not strong in South Korea. Moreover, the links between industry sector and HEIs is also weak in terms of the level of workforce training (Woo, 2010). Moreover, national (technical) qualifications also face a problem of communication with the labour market. In addition, college degree programmes are currently not linked to national qualifications.

More importantly, the learning culture of HE where academically oriented curricula have been dominant does not seem to fully appreciate the value of prior learning experiences. In other words, South Korea's HEIs do not have well developed plans to reach out to educationally marginalised people such as the elderly, immigrants, multi-cultural families, and so on. Moreover, HEIs do not appear to understand that, in the long-term, recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes through assessment of prior learning bring benefits to them, while HEIs in many European countries do.

Yet in common with its European counter-partners, South Korea's demand for recognition of prior learning is derived from socio-economic developments such as demographic changes and emerging knowledge-based economy (Lee et. al., 2010). In this respect, the South Korean government has sought a measure to reduce the costly education system that has focused too much on college preparation examinations and instructor-based pedagogy. This article illustrates the efforts of South Korean governments and its system that have addressed the issue of recognition of prior learning (RPL)/validation of prior learning (VPL) in the HE system, in particular the Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS).

### **Vocational Education and Training and Vocational Qualification Systems in South Korea**

Human capital is a key impetus for economic growth and social wellbeing. As the global economy enters harsh competition, South Korea is required to raise skill levels so as to secure sustainable growth. The expansion of HE in South Korea has led to high youth unemployment: however, under-investment in lifelong learning and post-secondary VET contributes to the skill-mismatch and manpower-mismatch (Park, 2011). It is important to understand VET-related systems, since they have a strong relationship to South

Korean VET policies. This section illustrates a school-based vocational education and vocational qualification systems.

#### *School-based Vocational Education*

In general, the education system of South Korea is based on a single track system with 6-year elementary school, 3 year middle school, 3-year high school, and 2 or 3 year college and 4-year university. According to the Enforcement Decree of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (2011), there are three types of high schools where initial VET begins in South Korea:

- General High Schools, providing education on diverse subjects and areas and intended for students who plan to pursue HE. VET in these schools are selective.
- Special Purpose High Schools specializing in fields such as natural sciences, foreign languages, arts and physical education, as well as offering programs customized and directly linked to the needs of industries in so-called “Meister High Schools”.
- Specialized (Vocational) High Schools, which have traditionally been the principal providers of vocational education at the secondary level in South Korea. Offering programs which differ depending on the target industry, these high schools give students the choice of either seeking employment upon graduation, or of continuing their education on the tertiary level.

Since South Korea’s VET has traditionally focused at a high school level, HE has been excluded from VET policies. Moreover, VET has been regarded as de facto teacher-oriented classroom activities and academic-based curriculum. Business involvement in VET schooling is limited. However, as South Korea enters a knowledge-based economy, the labour market also evolves and needs a more skilled workforce (Hwang, 2007). This implies that the experienced workforces with cognitive skills have increasingly valued. However, the bottom line is that while skills requirements continues to rise, VET in schooling systems and HE institutions have not properly responded to the changes.

In this context, the Ministry of Education of South Korea (MOE) introduced ‘Master High Schools’ in 2010 (KRIVET, 2010). Unlike the traditional vocational high schools, ‘Master High Schools’ are solely focused on adequately responding to the demands from industry and helping build the youth vocational competencies. Today, there are 16 ‘Master High Schools’, but the outputs of ‘Master High Schools’ are yet to be fully ascertained. So far, although the graduates of ‘Master High Schools’ are preferred by industry, in comparison with their counter-partners in General High Schools and Specialised (Vocational) High Schools, their competence levels are rather mediocre.

#### *Vocational Qualification System*

This section describes the Vocational Qualification System (VQS) of South Korea. The structure of VQS varies in types of vocational qualifications, awarding authorities, and certification procedures (KRIVET, 2001). There are three major types of qualifications in South Korea: National Technical Qualifications (NTQ), National Qualifications of Non-Technical Categories (NQNTC), and Private Qualifications (PQ).

First, NTQ is based upon National Technical Qualification Act has 25 technical categories and 603 vocations. NTQ focuses on manufacturing, service industry, business management, and others. To obtain a NTQ, the individual has to take a paper-pencil exam and an on-site practice test for low and mid-level qualifications, or an interview for higher level qualifications. The exams for a NTQ have been administered by HRD South Korea and South Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry. NTQ is designed to establish a link between supply and demand of skilled workers. The NTQ Act sets guidelines for incentives and standards for human resources management. There are five classifications in NTQ: Craftsman, Industrial Engineer, Engineer, Master Craftsman, and Professional Engineer. Table 1 shows the eligibility of NTQs.

*Table 1. Eligibility for NTQ*

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| Craftsman             | No Limitation   |
| Industrial Engineer   | Craftsman + 1 year, 2-3 year college graduate, 2 years of field experiences             |
| Engineer              | Industrial Engineer + 1 year, 4-year university graduate, 4 years of field experiences  |
| Master Craftsman      | Industrial Engineer + 6 years, Craftsman + 8 years, 11 years of field experiences       |
| Professional Engineer | Engineer + 4 years, 4-year university graduate + 7 years, 11 years of field experiences |

Source: Cho (1999)

Second, NQNTC has included 120 vocations such as lawyer, accountant, patent expert, and so on. There are various kinds of qualification items in this category from medical doctor to driving licence. An examination for this qualification is administered by an independent agency, which is commissioned or designated by a relevant government department.

Third, PQ refers to a system of qualification operated by non-governmental and civic organizations. For PQ, the South Korean government enacted Framework Act on Qualification (2011). PQ has dealt with 51 categories. Every year, more than 100 VET providers and associations applies for the authorization. The authorization and quality management of PQ has been operated by South Korea Research Institute for Vocational Education and Training (KRIVET) since 1999. Any VET provider or association may apply for PQ authorization. PQ includes areas such as business management, computers, language skills, sports and health, leisure and recreation activities, designing, hairdressing, social welfare, counselling, construction, civil engineering, machinery, and so on.

The variety of VQS in South Korea causes several concerns. First, the lack of coherence among the vocational qualifications continues, since they are issued by various government authorities and there has been no mediation of the differences among the branches of the government. Second, the criteria for the vocational qualifications are too complicated and too disconnected to communicate or compare with each other. Third, since the vocational qualifications are authorized by different government branches, it is almost impossible to grasp exactly whether and how a qualification copes with a certain demand from an industry. Fourth, due to the lack of incentive for a qualification at workplace, workers might lose interest in furthering their competence through acquiring a qualification.

### **A New Trend of Vocational Qualification System in South Korea**

There are several challenges in both supply and demand for skills in the South Korean economy (Woo, 2010). South Korean statistics (2011) suggest, for instance, that, from 2018, low birth rate will cause colleges and universities in South Korea to face the dramatic decline of new recruits causing the shortage of revenue. Public policies to fill the skills gap between workplace and vocational education institutions seem to be failing. To counteract this threat, HEIs should re-shape the structure to embrace the concept of lifelong learning and institutionalise it. One of the measures is recognizing and validating prior learning/experiences that the adult learners have possessed. For it, it is imperative that not only the quality but also the accessibility of HE for as many learners as possible be assured.

#### *Reframing the National Vocational Qualification System to link to the Labour Market*

From the 1960s to the 1980s when economic development was dominantly driven by the centralised government, South Korea's VET and qualification systems played major roles in cultivating a skilled workforce. But since the late 1990s, criticism has been leveled that conventional VET systems do not reflect requirements of a new economy, weakening the effectiveness of VET as well as the credibility of qualifications. As target skills levels for the workforce, the content and delivery of VET must change in order to keep up with sustainable development. For this purpose, both curricula and methods of teaching and learning at VET need to incorporate a competency-based approach. Realizing that advanced countries including the European and the Oceanic countries have developed and employed national occupational standards and constantly made efforts to produce competent workers, South Korean governments began to develop occupational standards from 2002 (KRIVET, 2009).

South Korea has been developing an articulation system between its traditional HE system and vocational training and qualification systems such as South Korean Skills Standard (KSS), the National Occupational System (NOS) and the South Korean Qualification Framework (KQF). NOS has been developed and operated by Ministry of Employment and Labour (MOEL) and KSS by Ministry of Education (MOE). These efforts are designed to link various VET systems and vocational qualifications systems and to enhance the development of the competence-based VET system.

To reinforce an overall coordinating function and to conduct effective qualification-related policies, since 2010, KSS and NOS have been merged to National Competency Standards (NCS). Now, MOEL and its affiliates have taken charge of developing and operating NCS (KRIVET, 2009). NCS is a concept which identifies and standardises competencies which are required for successful job performance. It is a comprehensive concept including ability such as knowledge, skill and attitude necessary to perform a job, and assessment of the ability. The purposes of NCS are as follows (KRIVET, 2009):

- Promoting strong links between vocational qualifications, work experiences, and training programmes
- Connecting VET programmes at HEIs and vocational high schools to the workplace
- Improving the quality of various qualification exams, skill standards and so on.

NCS has been developed using the following procedures: development of comprehensive plan, analysis of vocational structure and job, designing competence unit, standardisation of competences and levels, evaluation of basic competencies, allocation of codes, and verification of vocational standards. Experts from industry and research areas have participated in the processes. At the time of writing, the South Korean government has completed the development of NCS for 291 vocations out of the 800 vocations by 2011.

#### *Key Features of NCS*

Since 1996, South Korea has developed the NCS for 276 vocations in 16 industries. The NCS is a set of standards which define the knowledge, skills and qualities required of workers in specific vocational fields to set systematic criteria based on which individuals may be educated and trained. The NCS is expected to enhance the workplace relevance of education, training and qualifications as well as their linkage to each other (KRIVET, 2009). According to the Framework Act on Qualifications (2011), the Sector Human Resource Development Council should develop the NCS, which must then be approved by the government. Nine government ministries are responsible for the development of NCS in 20 industry categories, including agriculture and forestry, textiles, chemicals, machinery, electronics, environment, financial services, healthcare, culture, tourism, food processing and human services.

MOEL and its affiliates are now responsible for refining vocational qualifications, and improving practicability of vocational certificates, upgrading the system for producing work-oriented tests. They also attempt to enhance the applicability of NCS into labour market (KRIVET, 2009). So far, it has been applied in designing customized programs for two to three-year colleges and 'Master Schools'. At the tertiary level, VET is provided by two- to three-year colleges. By 2015, the NCS will also apply to 'Specialised (Vocational) High Schools'. Recently, efforts are now being undertaken to re-organise the national qualification system in such a way as to allow learners to accumulate credits towards a qualification and a college degree. The NCS is expected to serve as a channel for responding to the demands of industries and reforming the curriculum of secondary schooling and college and educational delivery system. This competency-based NCS, in

particular, focuses on problem-solving, communication, relationship management, teamwork, and so on.

However, the pace of application of NCS to HE and VET institutions is slow, since the stakeholders such as HEIs, VET institutions and industries do not fully embrace the concept and purpose of NCS. Moreover, unlike European countries, sector councils, one of the key players in developing and managing NCS, are poorly organised in South Korea and lack both interest and capabilities in respect of developing and implementing NQF and NSC.

### **Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS) and Bachelor's Degree Examination for Self-Education (BDES) in South Korea**

The ACBS of South Korea is a multifaceted system: it serves to help learners progressing toward higher education, assessing various types of learning experiences, and acquiring vocational qualifications and HE degrees. This section focuses on the brief introduction of the ACBS associated with VET and vocational qualifications.

#### *Sources of Credits in the ACBS*

One of the key features of the ACBS first implemented in 1998 is to create a system that helps learners translate their learning experiences into credits so that they can accumulate credits and transfer to further learning (NILE, 2013). Anyone who accesses the ACBS system is required to fill out a 'Learner Registration' form and submit it to the ACBS Division at National Institute for Lifelong Education (NILE). The ACBS Division provides learners with information via on-line or in-person counselling to help the learners prepare a study plan. After accumulating various learning experiences, the learner should apply for 'Credit Recognition' in order to convert the learning experiences into credits. The ACBS Division then reviews and assesses the learning experiences based upon criteria. Once the learner completes the number of credits required, he/she becomes eligible for applying for 'Degree Conferment'. The ACBS Division confers the degrees twice a year.

The ACBS reflects the complexity of lifelong education systems in South Korea. The ACBS offers six different routes to obtain, accumulate, and recognise learning experiences. According to Halasz *et al.* (2009) and NILE (2013), the six routes or the sources of credit are the following:

- Credits transferred from traditional HE institutions;
- Credits transferred from non-formal education and training providers accredited by the ACBS Division;
- Credits obtained by taking part-time courses in traditional HE institutions;
- Credits recognised for vocational qualifications by the ACBS Division;
- Credits transferred from the BDES (Bachelor's Degree Examination for Self-Education; this system makes it possible to obtain a bachelor's degree without attending a regular college or university by passing the examination operated by NILE);

- Credits recognised for 'Important Intangible Cultural Properties Learning' (the ACBS evaluates and accredits a master and his/her apprenticeship programmes that has inculcated and handed down with no Curriculum Standards artistic activities regarded as traditional and cultural heritages).

The Bachelor's Degree Examination for Self-Education (the BDES) is a system to test self-taught applicants on whether they are qualified to receive a bachelor's degree. Those who pass the final step are conferred the bachelor's degree, accredited by the Minister of Education, Science and Technology.

There are four exams for obtaining a bachelor's degree; each exam is once in a year. The BDES makes it possible to obtain a bachelor's degree without attending a regular college or university by passing the examination administered by the government. The BDES was established for people who cannot afford an educational opportunity within HE for various reasons such as financial constraint or time limitation. The Constitution of the Republic of South Korea states that the government should promote lifelong education and to actualise this, "The Law of Bachelor's Degree Examination for Self-Education" was established in 1990.

#### *The Key Stakeholders of the ACBS*

The ACBS is a key policy of lifelong education that allows any learner to obtain, accumulate, and transfer HE-level credits. The ACBS is an open system in constant evolution. The driving forces for the evolution have been derived from various roots. For instance, stakeholders with different purposes and interests exist for the evolution of the ACBS. The following are the several features and benefits using the ACBS associated with various stakeholders (Grubb et al., 2006; NILE, 2013).

First, traditional HEIs of South Korea have established on- and off-campus, and online lifelong education centres that function separately within their offer. HEIs, as VET providers, have offered various programmes for traditional and non-traditional learners. These campus-based lifelong education centres for non-traditional students should be accredited by NILE to be part of the ACBS. Once accredited, an HEI becomes more flexible in assessing and recognising both academic and non-academic experiences from various sources. In addition, the ACBS has helped HEIs to induct credit accumulation and transfer system for non-academic experiences into a HE area. For traditional HEIs, the connection with the ACBS is regarded as an instrument to open to non-traditional learners and to change their academic-oriented curriculum. Moreover, the ACBS has had an influence on modifying the practices of education, assessment, and entrance requirements, and recognising non-formal and informal learning outputs that the adult learners possess. At a local level, the ACBS also helps local governments expand the accessibility to the HE for local constituents. Once a Local Lifelong Learning Centre established by local governments is accredited by the ACBS, it becomes part of the HE system.

Second, South Korean government departments, including the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Employment and Labour have recently put pressure on traditional universities. Traditional HE institutions are being asked to change their structure and policies so as to embrace labour market relevance, lifelong learning orientation, and greater accessibility. Since 2013, the newly formed government has asked HEIs to transform their academic-oriented curricula to the NCS-based models. As the ACBS system is currently the only experienced system in terms of recognising non-formal and informal learning, it serves as the only system for the South Korean governments to pursue quality assurance and monitoring the implementation of NCS including RPL/VPL.

Third, a VET provider accredited by the ACBS awards a HE degree. A VET provider offers programmes usually relevant for the demands of labour market. In order to be accredited, a VET provider should follow the Curriculum Standards set by the ACBS. From 2014, the South Korean government initiates an incentive that an accredited VET provider adopting NCS on its curriculum might be eligible for public funding such as the Employment Insurance Fund.

Fourth, an employer or a firm may be a key stakeholder in the ACBS system. A firm may want its in-built training programmes to be accredited by the ACBS. With its programmes accredited, a firm can make a step towards its employees obtaining HE degrees through its own firm-specific training programmes, alongside vocational qualifications. By linking a firm-specific training programme to the HE system, the ACBS plays a role in establishing a bridge between the outputs of a competence-oriented training, on-site/non-formal learning and a formal HE system.

Last but not least, the ACBS is a part of lifelong education policy and also a part of the HE system in South Korea. An individual learner views the ACBS as a second chance to further his/her study at HE level or to obtain a vocational qualification. To an adult learner, the ACBS might seem attractive, since it has no rigid pre-requisite for admission, it is flexible in terms of time management and credits for a semester, and it offers chances to pursue career development as well as a HE degree at the same time. It is also easier for learners to change their speciality or major, which would be difficult in a traditional HE institution. It is important to note that, by law, a learner is not allowed to enrol in the ACBS and a traditional HE institution at the same time. A traditional HE institution only accepts a certain number of the credits that an individual learner has obtained in the ACBS (Grubb et al., 2006).

The stakeholders discussed above will remain the key forces for evolving the ACBS. However, the ACBS still has a problem with visibility in that, for individual learners, individualised counselling and guidance are not as readily accessible as they should be.

#### *Linking VET and the ACBS and the BDES*

Increasingly, VET in South Korea has asked for a credit accreditation and transfer system to help learners move forward to HE. South Korea has two types of academic credit recognition and transfer system in terms of non-traditional HE system: Bachelor Degree

Examination through Self-Education system (BDES) and the ACBS. While the former allows adult learners to obtain an HE degree through self-directed learning and examinations, the latter offers learners opportunities to gain a bachelor's degree or an associate bachelor's degree. Both systems have been administered by NILE. In the ACBS, once credits are accumulated and approved, the learners become eligible for a relevant degree or a qualification. In this case, a degree awarding institution is NILE.

The ACBS is so flexible that credits obtained through one source can be transferred to - and accumulated with - the other. The ACBS Division at NILE functions as an agency assessing and accrediting learning programmes and those institutions. The learning programme providers vary: on- and off-campus programmes of a traditional HE, private VET providers, and so on. Learning programme providers accredited by the ACBS offer learners various programmes in order that the learners can obtain HE-level credits and accumulate the credits conducive to acquiring a HE degree. The ACBS has developed Curriculum Standards to assess learning programme providers and their programmes. Curriculum Standards are the documents that define the number of credit hours, subject/major areas and assessment methods. With Curriculum Standards, the ACBS makes a decision regarding accreditation of learning providers and their programmes. The ACBS Division does not assess the learning outcomes that an individual learner has acquired; rather, it assesses the learning providers and their programmes and accredits them based upon the Curriculum Standards.

### **RPL/VPL in the ACBS and the BDES**

Although South Korea's NCS has made significant progress during the last decade, it still lacks the capacity to link together the various qualification-related elements of the world of lifelong learning. The ACBS system has contributed to establishing better linkages between HE systems and vocational qualifications: however, these linkages are still weak. Challenges occur on connecting two different systems: non-academic experiences and qualifications and academic credits.

Learners with or without HE degrees may have non-formal and informal learning experiences from workplace, everyday life, training, qualifications. The ACBS has put an RPL/VPL system in place for non-formal and informal learning. So far, the ACBS is the only system in South Korea that assesses and recognises non-formal and informal learning experiences and award academic credits. Through the ACBS, the learners might continue their further education and obtain an HE degree. It is important to understand that the Curriculum Standards in the ACBS refer to the educational courses regulated by the Ministry of Education. Curriculum Standards are designed to offer learners and educational institutions guidelines. They function as a basis for evaluating and awarding credit hours acquired, majors, and degrees. Based upon this Curriculum Standards, the ACBS offers 109 majors for 24 bachelor's degrees and 109 courses for 13 associates' degrees as of 2013 (NILE, 2013). This section describes how the ACBS operates RPL/VPL.

*Recognition, accumulation/transfer of credits of the ACBS*

There are more than 700 national qualifications and more than 900 private qualifications (KRIVET, 2009). Training programmes operated by a firm might lead to a vocational qualification. However, much of the training is designed only to meet a firm’s specific needs. Since firms show little interest in connecting training programmes to vocational qualifications, firm-based qualifications are not likely to be recognised outside of the firm; the gaining of academic credits by individuals presents an additional issue. Nonetheless, a firm-based qualification is closely linked to the workplace: in other words, it might be linked to the ACBS. Therefore, it is imperative that the VET certification system (National Technical Qualifications) be included in the recognition of prior professional experiences in the ACBS.

The ACBS, as one of the lifelong learning systems in South Korea, offers opportunities to people who seek a higher education degree and a vocational qualification through not only formal learning programmes (accredited based upon the Curriculum Standards) but also non-formal and informal learning experiences (vocational qualifications and other learning experiences). In the ACBS, a qualification might be recognised as an HE credit. A qualification can be recognised and accumulated as a credit for an HE degree. For instance, the ACBS recognises some of South Korea’s vocational qualifications as a credit. As presented in Table 1, there are five classifications in South Korea’s NTQ system. Among the five classifications, the ACBS accepts and recognises qualifications top four classifications: Industrial Engineer, Engineer, Master Craftsman, and Professional Engineer. Table 2 shows the RPL/VPL of NTQ in the ACBS.

*Table 2. Credit Recognitions of Vocational Qualifications in the ACBS*

| NTQ                   | Credits in the ACBS |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Industrial Engineer   | 24 credits          |
| Engineer              | 30 credits          |
| Master Craftsman      | 39 credits          |
| Professional Engineer | 45 credits          |

Source: Halasz *et al.* (2009).

There are three key features of the ACBS related to RPL/VPL. The first feature is that the ACBS links VET and HE institutions. In doing it, the ACBS award credits for qualifications gained through VET and vocational qualifications. There are more than 714 national vocational technical qualifications and more than 900 private vocational qualifications: among them the ACBS has recognized 598 qualifications as academic credits equivalent to credits from HEIs (NILE, 2013). The transformation of VET qualifications into academic credits happens according to credit recognition criteria.

The second feature is that the outputs of informal learning are assessed and recognised as academic credits. For example, the examinations for National Technical Qualifications require workplace experiences as a prerequisite. Although there is no separate assessment of the workplace experiences in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitude, all examinations consist of both a written and an on-site test.

The third feature is that all the requirements or criteria for a qualification should be stated in terms of learning outputs using active verbs. For example, the criteria for a certificate are stated respectively as follows:

- For a Craftsman: “The applicant has the ability to carry out task management duties such as produce, manufacture, operate, repair, and inspect”;
- For a Professional Engineer: “The applicant has the ability to plan, research, design, analyze, test, operate, construct, evaluate or guide and supervise these activities based on a high level of expert knowledge and field experience”.

In addition, South Korea’s MoE also introduced a new measure, ‘Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)’, in order to upgrade the skill levels of adult workforce and help their professional and career development. The implementation of RPL has focused on two- and three-year colleges that have been offering degree courses through ‘A Collaboration Programme by Contract with a Firm’ and exemption of entrance exams for adult workforce (Lee et al., 2010). It is important, however, to note that for the college and universities, the notion of RPL/VPL system is still alien to most of the HE institutions in South Korea and the experts of RPL/VPL are rather in absence.

#### *RPL/VPL Practices in the ACBS and the BDES*

Along with BDES (Bachelor’s Degree Examination for Self-Education), the ACBS has operated a RPL/VPL system including recognition of prior learning/experiences as a credit, accumulation and transfer of credits at a tertiary education level in South Korea. With respect to RPL/VPL, the following are the core features that the ACBS has put in place:

- Assessing and recognising VET providers and their programmes;
- Assessing and recognising input factors;
- Accumulation of learning outputs via credit hours.

The ACBS accredits the educational programmes. The accreditation refers to the process of evaluation and accreditation of curriculum offered by educational institutions and accredited institutions automatically become credit awarding organisations; conversely, the European countries evaluate the learning outcomes of an individual learner. In addition to the ACBS, the BDES has also operated a RPL/VPL system in South Korea administrated both by NILE. Table 3 shows the comparisons of the ACBS and the BDES both operated by NILE.

In the BDES, a learner must take a qualifying examination to progress a next step. Applicants can get the bachelor’s degree after passing four qualifying examinations of

Liberal Arts, Major-Basic, Major Advanced, and Comprehensive. Applying each exam needs to be qualified. For example, a person who is eligible for applying the second exam does not need to pass the first exam. Table 3 shows the qualifying process for obtaining a HE degree through the BDES. In the following cases, applicants are exempt from the first three examinations:

- An applicant who has finished freshman year of college or university is exempt from the Qualifying Examination for Liberal-Arts;
- An applicant who has finished sophomore year of college or university in the same major field is exempt from the Qualifying Examinations for Liberal Arts and Major Basics;
- An applicant who has finished junior year of college or university in the same major field is exempt from the Qualifying Examinations for Liberal Arts, Major Basic and Major Advanced;
- An applicant who has passed a qualifying examination administered by the government and has obtained its certificate of license is exempt from the examination related to it;
- An applicant who has completed a course by attending a lecture at lifelong education institutions affiliated with colleges or universities designated by NILE is exempt from the examination related to it;
- Anyone who has acquired credits through the Academic Credit Bank System is exempt from the Qualifying Examinations for Liberal Arts, Major Basic and Major Advanced according to their obtained credits.

*Table 3. The Qualifying Process of the BDES*

| <b>Courses</b>  | <b>Contents</b>  |
|---|--|
| 1st Course. Qualifying Examination for Liberal-Art    | Evaluating general knowledge taught in a university<br>Qualification: Those who have at least a high school diploma or equivalent                                      |
| 2nd Course. Qualifying Examination for Major-Basic    | Evaluating basic-level knowledge and academic skills for each major<br>Qualification: Those who completed at least a year of university or equivalent                  |
| 3rd Course. Qualifying Examination for Major-Advanced | Evaluating in-depth and professional knowledge and academic skills for each major<br>Qualification: Those who completed at least two years of university or equivalent |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| 4th Course.<br>Comprehensive<br>Examination | Evaluating general knowledge and academic skills both on a general level and a professional level<br>Qualification: Those who completed at least three years of university or equivalent |
|---|--|

Source; NILE (2012).

If an applicant is exempt from a subject, it is indicated with an “E”, and if he/she is exempt from a course, for instance, Liberal Arts, it is indicated with an “Exemption”. All the applicants are required to take the Comprehensive Qualifying Examination, which is the final step for attaining the degree.

As seen in Table 4, the ACBS, unlike the BDES, does not assess knowledge or competences that individual learners might have: the ACBS system is a registration system rather than an assessment and recognition system. For example, an individual learner submits the document of his/her learning outputs to the ACBS and the ACBS puts it into a digital database. It is up to a VET provider accredited by the ACBS to assess and recognise the knowledge and competences that a learner presents in the document: the BDES evaluates the competences of an individual learner via a paper-pencil examination. The ACBS system assesses and recognises input factors (the teaching staff quality, the matching of a VET provider’s curriculum with Curriculum Standards), while the BDES assesses and recognises individual learning outputs. Finally, the ACBS breaks down the learning outputs into credits, while BDES does none.

*Table 4. Comparisons of the Core Features of the ACBS and the BDES*

|      | Assessment of knowledge/competences                 | Assessment Unit                 | Assessment Focus  | Accumulation of learning outputs |
|------|---|---------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| ACBS | No but only evaluation of administrative procedures | Accreditation of a VET provider | Inputs factors based upon criteria for a programme and a VET provider | Yes                              |
| BDES | Yes via paper-pencil exams                          | Exams of individual learners    | Learning outputs via exams  | No                               |

Source: Halasz *et al.*(2009).

Although RPL/VPL in South Korea is not as extensive as in European countries, the recognition, accumulation, assessment and transfer of learning outputs are being operationalised. It is important to note that several key concepts such as learning outcomes, modules and units, the background and driving forces for adopting RPL/VPL, and VET market in South Korea are different from those among European partners. However, both the ACBS and the BDES are to some degree designed to modularise

learning outputs. In fact, the ACBS is, from 2014, planning to reflect NCS-based curricula on its own credit awarding system: in this way, the ACBS might establish a firm foothold to communicate with other training and vocational qualification systems like NCS and NQF.

Regarding the linkages between ACBS and other systems such as VET programmes, qualification systems, and traditional HE systems, the ACBS can be regarded as a passive system rather than active one. It is since the ACBS has not actively become involved in searching for non-formal and informal learning outcomes and recognising them as academic credits. Rather, ACBS has merely received, acknowledged, and made a decision about 'the proof of prior learning' that an individual learner themselves turn in. As seen in Table 4, the ACBS does not have any criteria to assess the outcomes of informal learning that an individual learner has experienced.

Along with 'Important Intangible Cultural Properties Learning' for apprenticeship programmes as stated above, the ACBS has also recognised several training courses in the South Korean military, including special training courses for a scuba-diver, an explosive specialist, and so on. In association with RPL/VPL, the ACBS has accredited 13 programmes/institutions for 'Important Intangible Cultural Properties Learning' and 28 programmes/institutions for military education as of 2013 (NILE, 2013).

### **Barriers and Future Directions of VPL/RPL in South Korea**

As the OECD report states, most of South Korea's education, including HE, still focuses on information transfer (Grubb et al., 2006). The dominant culture of workplace and HE in South Korea underestimates the value of informal learning. The efforts to change lecture-oriented pedagogy happen in isolation. The problem, however, is that this convention on the pedagogy is likely to be reinforced by RPL/VPL practices (OECD, 2007). This section illustrates the barriers to expand RPL/VPL in South Korea and its future directions.

#### *Barriers to RPL/VPL*

As South Korea attempts to establish a bridge between HE and lifelong learning, it is imperative to adopt a measure that recognizes and validates individual learners' prior learning experiences. HEIs are reluctant and lack interest in recognising prior learning since they generally recruit young adults from secondary schooling. They do not understand how important it is to recognise various learning experiences accumulated through workplace, social interactions, and training.

It is known that the learning culture of a country determines strongly how RPL/VPL is conceived and operated (Duvekot *et al.*, 2005). The learning culture of South Korea is dominantly perceived as a model of social selection. This culture has an impact on the characteristics and processes of RPL/VPL. In South Korea where a paper-pencil examination, a summative evaluation, and teacher-oriented and knowledge-based curricula are dominant and preferred, it may be perceived as a threat to the academy to

adopt assessment of informal learning and recognise assessment results as a credit in HE. In addition, popular assessment tools for RPL/VPL used in European countries and other countries such as peer evaluation, personal portfolio, or observation are very unpopular within the South Korean HE community.

Furthermore, in South Korea, transparency and trust in the RPL/VPL assessments discussed above are still in question (Halasz *et al.*, 2009). ACBS is the only institution operating RPL/VPL in South Korea, and should conduct RPL/VPL in association with NQF and NCS as European countries do: however, this is not the case. Therefore, it is possible that obtaining a college degree through RPL/VPL would be never brought to fruition in the situation where the ACBS degree is regarded as a second level or inferior degree. In reality, as in other countries (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2011), the development of RPL in South Korea associated with the ACBS also takes a long time and might work more effectively when relevant policy objectives and demands are more clearly defined and the leadership and policy drive is sustainable.

In relation to the current policy trend in South Korea regarding RPL/VPL in association with NCS, several questions remain to be answered. First, the question of where South Korea stands in the global scene; in other words, issues such as what skills are deficient, where institutional gaps are derived from, and what causes information failure are key to the success for the RPL/VPL in South Korea. Second, any specific plan to improve the VET system still seems to be vague. Third, quality assurance mechanisms are still government-driven, top-down. There exists almost no roadmap for the empowerment of civil or private partners such as local community organizations, labour unions, and sector councils. Fourth, unlike European countries, the purposes of RPL/VPL - as well as NCS in South Korea - place less value on how to help marginalised groups and individuals such as the unemployed, older citizens, women, part-time workers, and immigrants.

#### *Future Directions for RPL/VPL in South Korea*

Some experts in South Korea believe that the reform of vocational qualifications systems such as NCS and NQF might play a pivotal role in adopting RPL/VPL. As seen in the cases of the countries where NQF and other vocational standards have been developed, the issue of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes will come to the fore in policy debates. Modularisation of learning courses and credit transfer as European Credit system for Vocational and Educational Training (ECVET) and European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) should be central to connecting the ACBS and NCS.

Similarly to many European countries, the introduction and increasingly widespread application of NCS will have an impact on the development of the RPL/VPL system in South Korea. The bottom-line is that the success of RPL/VPL depends on how South Korean society thinks about RPL/VPL: Therefore, it is critical to include these links between NCS and RPL/VPL in consideration for policy design.

In order to overcome the barriers stated above, several issues that policy-makers and researchers of the ACBS should pay attention as follows:

- The modularisation of learning programmes/courses comparable to NCS;
- The development of learning outcomes-based curriculum and assessment tools;
- The development of transfer system among NCS-based academic programmes/courses and the ACBS.

#### *Modularisation of Learning Programmes*

The ACBS has contributed to the introduction of the concept and practice of modularisation in South Korea. Although the ACBS recognises elements of learning as part of a full course, the 'Standards Curriculum' of the ACBS does not consist of a series of units or modules in any way. Modularisation of the learning content is a key element of NCS: it creates the flexibility and transparency of the content so as to increase comparability between different modules and units. The ACBS is not based upon the modularisation, nor the learning outcome-based assessment. The Curriculum Standards of the ACBS are not based on learning outcomes, while NCS is based on the descriptors and profile of learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and attitudes). Regarding this, there are two key questions to be considered when it comes to connecting VET and HE systems. The first question is how the descriptors of NCS should be recognised as an academic credit: in other words, how to adapt the existing Curriculum Standards of the ACBS. The second question is how far vocational qualification systems can or should be constructed in terms of units, modules or credits. It is important to note that the Curriculum Standards of the ACBS are not consisted of the smaller learning units or modules that are the basis of NCS. In this respect, the efforts of England, Scotland, and other European countries where vocational systems and academic institutions are linked using various measures such as ECVET and ECTS might be useful. The reports on those countries prove that there is a positive relationship between vocational qualification system and HE institutions in terms of credit accumulation and transfer (Coles, 2006). As such, the ACBS also should develop new assessment methods or create an agreed platform to communicate NCS and its Curriculum Standards.

In order to connect the ACBS and NCS, there might be further options. First, the ACBS might need to further the development of upon NCS-oriented 'Standards Curriculum' in association with the RPL/VPL of non-formal and informal learning. In this case, it will take time and cost to modify all the existing Curriculum Standards (Werquin, 2010). Second, the ACBS and the authorities dealing with NCS must reach a mutual agreement: the ACBS accredits VET providers using NCS for their curriculum and recognises the learning outcomes accumulated in the VET provision, while the authorities for NCS recognise the learning outputs accumulated in the ACBS. In any case, modularisation will be increasingly important in the ACBS and creates a more expanded platform to communicate with various job-related systems.

### *Development of Learning Outcomes-based Curriculum and Assessment Tools*

The relationship between learning outcomes and competences is a complex area; it is the subject of some debate and no little confusion. Such confusion and debate regarding the definition of competence exists such that is impossible to identify a single theory (Adam, 2004; Winterton et al., 2005). Halasz et al. (2009) point out that the ACBS focuses much less on informal learning than most such systems in other OECD countries. There are some differences between the ACBS and NCS. First, the ACBS is based upon learning outputs and NCS is based upon learning outcomes. In other words, the ACBS is based upon a traditional college curriculum, not based upon competence-based analysis. Second, the learning outcomes of NCS are composed of knowledge, skills, and competencies that individual learners have acquired in the workplace. If the NCS-based qualification systems become active, not only formal learning institutions which have traditionally awarded a qualification and a degree, but also other non-formal and informal learning systems and institutions will become awarding institutions. This scenario will almost certainly benefit all adult learners.

For successfully connecting the ACBS and NCS, it is critical to create a reliable mechanism for assessing the learning outcomes acquired both through the ACBS's 'Standards Curriculum' and the NCS-based curriculum. It would, however, be time-consuming for the ACBS to develop a new profile of knowledge, skills, and competencies to make comparisons with the NCS. Rather, it would make better sense for the ACBS to play a role in facilitating an NCS-based curriculum across the education and training institutions accredited by the ACBS. In this regard, the ACBS should build a mutually acceptable bridge to assess and recognise the learning outcomes accumulated in non-formal and informal settings. The potential reliability of such a mechanism might enhance the possibilities of creating a stable and visible link between NCS and the ACBS for mutually recognising each other's qualifications. Thus a learning outcome based approach to a qualification as well as a college degree will contribute to improving social equity which is a central concept of lifelong learning policy in South Korea. The European experiences with ECVET and ECTS indicate that the more the credit systems are based on learning outcomes, the better South Korea might achieve the link between the ACBS and NCS.

Another issue that the ACBS has to overcome is the professionals responsible for assessing RPL/VPL. Since the ACBS has suffered from frequently changing regulations and complicated accreditation processes, 'brokers' have come into play in the 'market of the ACBS'. This means that although the entire system of the ACBS is operated by a public entity - NILE - and the 'market of the ACBS' is intensely competitive, small and mid-size VET providers accredited by the ACBS have been compelled to hire 'brokers'. It is important to note that creating and operating reliable assessment measures is costly. Therefore, South Korea could benchmark the European cases and estimate a possible cost for each individual learner and each institution, and, moreover, decide who would share the cost. Regarding all these, the issues of quality assurance and trust have always been problematic. With all respect, therefore, the ACBS should invest in training RPL/VPL experts as well as professional development for the ACBS staff.

### *Development of a Credit Transfer System*

Particular attention should be paid to mutual recognition of various learning outcomes such as a qualification and a degree. Currently, the ACBS recognises non-formal learning outcomes (vocational qualifications) and informal learning outcomes (military training courses and 'Important Intangible Cultural Properties Learning'), alongside formal learning outcomes and it awards college degrees based upon the 'Standards Curriculum'. South Korea has already benefited from the work of the ACBS that connects vocation-oriented learning and HE degree programmes. However, to avoid a possible conflict with NCS-based academic programmes/courses, the ACBS has to invent some mitigatory measures. In terms of NCS, the ACBS still has a room for development. Since the ACBS so far accepts the credits transferred from accredited courses and BDES, credits from NCS-based education and training programmes might be a new source for revenue as well as a link between the ACBS and VET systems. In doing so, the ACBS might gain more influential leverage connecting with a traditional HE and other systems.

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# Integrated solutions for adult learning professionals to access master levels

# 4

Simona Sava, Claudia Borca & Elena Danciu

The need for better access to higher education is widely argued in Europe. Different countries already introduced into their legislation the validation of prior learning outcomes (VPL) as a solution for widening access to different study programs, irrespective of their deliverance at bachelor, master or doctorate level. This contribution discusses how such options can be applied to adult learning professionals (ALPs), in order to provide better access to master levels in countries where such regulation does not yet exist. Different experiences and solutions developed in recent years in this respect are presented.

## **Why we need the VPL approach for the adult learning professionals?**

The simple and direct answer might be: to certify and formally get recognize competencies, knowledge and skills acquired on the job, in years of working with adults for educational purposes.

The formal recognition is needed for enhancing the professional status, for better career options and higher salaries, for increased self-esteem, for better qualification etc. (Sava, 2012).

The advantages of undertaking a VPL process have been illustrated in different policy documents and in studies of different experts (European Commission 2012; CEDEFOP, 2009; Duvekot, 2007; Sava, 2012), underlining the benefits for individuals, organizations and society.

Since around 2006, at the European level the need for setting up national systems for professionalization of the adult learning staff is specifically mentioned, as a solution for enhancing quality in adult education. The topic was reiterated in the European Agenda for Adult Learning (Council of Europe, 2011), asking the member states to set up such systems till the end of 2014 (see Sava, 2014). Inventory of good practices in enhancing the professional status of adult educators, with concluding on an updated competency was carried out by CEDEFOP in 2013 (CEDEFOP, 2013).

In Romania the elements of such system were designed (Sava/Ulrich/Mironov, 2013), based on the beneficiary's options. One of the clearly stipulated options was the inclusion of the VPL solution, as a path integrating and bringing further the previous educational, learning, working and life experiences, with the related competencies acquired.

The VPL approach is an integrative part of any system of professionalizing adult learning staff, due to the potential it has for the individuals, for organizations and society. Reducing costs for training, time, motivating people and increasing their stability into adult education, are just some of the added values of the VPL approach (Lupou 2010, Sava/Lupou 2009, Sava, 2011, 2012).

The VPL solution exists in a lot of countries as a possibility to get formalized the pedagogic, managerial, counseling and other competencies of trainers and other ALPs. In Romania evaluation centers for validating the pedagogic competencies of the adult educators exist for around 10 years. Our research about the impact of the validation process for the trainers passing through such process shows the positive effects for personal and professional development, for enhancing self-esteem, and for identifying the needs for further training, undertaking it accordingly (Sava/Crasovan/Siliman, 2012). For an individual, the opportunity of building up a learning biography or portfolio, showing the learning outcomes, is stimulating self-investment in learning, as previous studies also show (Duvekot et al, 2007). But, in spite of this, the credibility of such a path for formal recognition is still questionable, the employers and ALPs themselves preferring the training path, as it is better known (Lupou/Nuissl/Sava, 2010). The methodology for VPL and the whole system exists since 2004. But it is just an alternative path for the validation and certification of the existing competencies, it is not integrated yet as a possibility to enhance access to formal provisions, mainly delivered by higher education institutions, to ensure higher qualification level obtained in a more flexible way, built upon existing competencies being recognized.

The resistance of introducing such a path is even higher in universities, in spite of clear benefits. In times when the number of students is decreasing, the public funds for higher education decreasing too, the students are looking for more flexible and quick solutions, to support them to struggle with their time, money, and other constrains, the universities are forced to look for alternative solutions. They are also asked to act as lifelong universities (European Commission, 2011, EUA, 2008), being more open and adapted to the non-traditional older students, with a wide experience and need for getting them recognized.

The ALPs are certainly one of such professional groups, with a wide experience accumulated within workplace, and with limited possibilities of formal education, both in pre-service and in-service provisions, the offers for BA and MA studies in adult education being quite limited (Sava, 2012). Therefore, the newly set offers, mainly at master level (as most of ALPs looking for such recognition have already higher education diploma) have to take into consideration such potential students and to introduce VPL services as well. Such services support the adult education practitioner to get in shorter time the formal recognition and the MA certificate, attending only the courses related to the missing knowledge, skills and competencies. This is also for the benefit of his working organization, as better-qualified staff increases its attractiveness and credibility. Thus, negotiations with the employer for investing in articulation of competences and their capitalization by attending such master studies can become part of the organization's management strategy for staff development.

For society as well such solution will bring benefits, as there is a big concern for increasing the quality of adult education sector, the professionals being key factors in increasing it. By encouraging more ALPs to go for such a career step, by more attractive provisions of higher education institutions, an important step forward towards better qualified ALPs is ensured. Usually the ALPs act as models, and also as counselors for adult learners. Passing through such experience is a very good way to convince and advice the learners to undertake such possibility and to engage in a more determined way in lifelong learning. But this means that at macro level, there is need for further regulations to create favorable conditions for universities to integrate the VPL services and practices as formally recognized ones.

### **VPL as supporting mechanism for one step up in the career development of adult learning professionals**

When discussing about the need for “qualifying adult learning professionals in Europe” (Nuissl/Lattke 2008), the different clusters for job profiles in adult education have been differentiated. The “Alpine” study from 2008 has provided a clearer picture of the status of the ALPs, pointing out that usually the ALPs perform different roles, the dominant one being the trainer, but in most of the situations, additional roles are performed as well, like counseling, program planning, evaluation, marketing and public relation, manager, to name some of them (Research voor Beleid, 2008). In the efforts to professionalize the adult learning staff different attempts to map their competency profile have been undertaken, both nationally and in international partnerships. In 2010 the key competencies for ALPs have been set as common reference at European level (Research voor Beleid, 2010).

In some countries these different occupations in adult education have been officially recognized and introduced in the national classification of occupations. For instance, in Romania in 2011 the following distinct occupations for the “specialists in training and development of personnel” have been defined: trainer, trainer of trainers, organizer/designer/consultant of training, specialist on evaluating, recruiting and professional development, evaluator of competencies, manager of training, administrator of training.

Such official steps towards a better defined professional status of adult educators are to be complemented with designing different levels into career, both for further qualification and for upgrading of competencies, and enhanced expertise has to be proved, against set standards. The European Qualification Framework is an important instrument; the related national qualification frameworks are the guidelines for universities and other training providers to adapt their educational provision, for a better articulation with the labor market and with the formal frameworks of recognition.

The practitioners in adult education, as they are performing often more roles, can better document their existing knowledge and competencies and make it comparable with the curricular offer of different study plans. For instance, the offers for qualification in universities, as pre-service training, are designed in a broader way, to prepare the future specialist for a wider range of occupational options on the labor market.

While doing the VPL, such reality should be taken into consideration. As individuals have these combined roles, it is easier to document, against formalized standards and learning outcomes, that the syllabus of different courses in a study plan stipulates. Not only that such approach widens the participation to higher education to the non-traditional older students, as it is demanded for higher education (see European Commission, 2013, p.35), but requires, to be more functionally implemented, that the study plans are designed in a more flexible, modularized way, to allow and to encourage the practitioners in adult education to undertake such learning and qualification option.

Therefore, among the different practitioners in adult education, this paper focuses on the staff in the higher education meant to run such VPL process for the ALPs. Different tools and instruments have been developed over the years to support their work, some of them being shortly introduced further.

### Different solutions and instruments for running a VPL process

Between 2006-2008 the Romanian Institute for Adult Education from Timisoara (IREA) has coordinated the *Validation of Informal and Non-Formal Psycho-Pedagogical Competencies of Adult Educators - VINEPAC*, a Leonardo da Vinci project run together with partners from Germany, Romania, France, Spain and Malta. Within the project, the VALIDPACK instrument has been created, as a flexible tool for VPL of the trainers in adult education.

The validation process was designed in *three steps*, as shown in the figure 1:

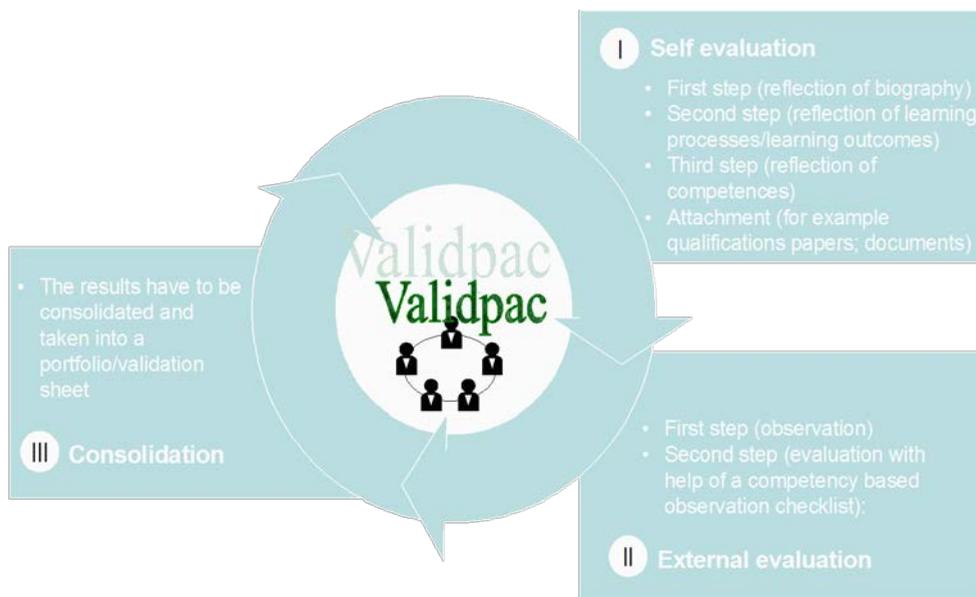


Figure 1: The three steps of the validation process (source Sava/Lupou, 2008)

The tool was designed as a flexible, easy to handle and easy to adapt to different contexts and country regulations regarding the VPL. Furthermore, the pack(age) as such contains also a guide for using the instrument for validation of pedagogic competencies. Its comprehensive publication was done in 2008 (Sava/Lupou, 2008). The chosen name of « handbook » illustrates that the idea of easy-to-use, in a self-administrated way, at least for building up the personal and professional portfolio, for elaborating the self-evaluation report, as the basis for conducting further the validation process.

Beside the three steps (with their sub-steps), the *Introduction* provides the preliminary information about how to use Validpack, who is entitled to use it, how to use it, with a separate guide in this respect.

At that time of designing Validpack, there was no commonly agreed competency profile for the trainer, so we designed a tentative one. The *Key competences for adult learning professionals* were designed by *Research voor Beleid* only in 2010, and each country has its occupational standard. Nevertheless, the categories of competencies listed by the Vinepac partnership can be found in the later developments.

Innovative is that the self-evaluation is guided not only for the identification of different units of competencies, but also for the level of mastering them. Evaluation of the degree of mastering it is usually missing (at least in the Romanian methodology, where it is important only to find out if the trainer is competent, or not yet competent), making difficult to differentiate between the standard trainer and the „exceptional” one. Guidance is also provided on how to write the *narrative self-evaluation report*. Such development can be easily adapted by the staff doing the VPL for accessing the university provision. In this case the adaptation is done according to the stipulated learning outcomes. The second step in the validation process, as it is designed in Validpack, can be used either to be integrated in the portfolio of the candidate (if more extended a portfolio is requested – see the idea of the *portfolio-loop*, (Duvekot, 2011)), or as tools to be adapted for the practicum of the students.

The *Consolidation step* must also be adapted for the administrative purposes and formats of validation sheets developed within universities.

Validpack is designed in a flexible way too. The trainer is transparent on how the external evaluation will take place, based on which criteria, having the whole picture of the validation process, keeping in mind that this tool was designed for running the whole validation process with a certification purpose. While adapting such a tool for the use of increasing access to higher education, the matching is to be done against the existing curricular offer and the study program candidate wants access to. Therefore, the evaluator of competencies running the validation process has to adapt such instrument and guideline to the university’s procedures. However, the strength of Validapack is that such approach is appropriate both for the trainers as the ones undertaking the validation process, as far as they master the meta-competence of self-reflection at high level, and they master also the evaluation process.

Further development tried to build up on Validpack and to adapt it to different other professionals in adult education. Its adaptation was done for career counselors (see

Crasovan/Sava, 2012, within the “Back to work” project: [www.backwork.eu](http://www.backwork.eu)) and for senior adult educators (see Strauch/ Radke/ Lupou 2010, within the Flexi-Path project: [www.flexipath.eu](http://www.flexipath.eu)).

Also, the wide dissemination of Validpack was financed through the CAPIVAL project (2011-2013) and then the training concept was developed for the evaluators of competencies ([www.capival.eu](http://www.capival.eu)). It was investigated how Validpack can be adapted in different countries.

Within the Flexi-Path project was developed an educational material for supporting the access from 6<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> EQF level, so it can be easily used to design the tools for VPL at master level.

### **VPL in universities: how the access to master level can be supported?**

VPL is a suitable solution for meeting the demands of higher education in widening the access to higher education, in improving the retention of students, increasing efficiency by improving completion rates, and reducing the time taken to complete degree courses (European Commission, 2013, p.35). For Romania, one of the European country with the lowest attainment rate at tertiary level (21.8% - see EC 2013, p.36) in particular, such solution is needed to be adopted very soon. Therefore, within the project ALLinHE, the discussions and reflections with different stakeholders were directed towards discussions of how such process can be speeded up. Useful examples are provided on how to increase the access to higher education for the non-traditional students and to enhance the link with adult learning sector (European Commission 2011, 2013, European Union 2013), underlining that the VPL process plays an important role not only for widening the access, but also for improving the retention of students by helping them to pick up more significant and adapted learning offers, and reducing the time taken to complete degree courses.

There are different models and guidelines developed at European, OECD and UNESCO level (CEDEFOP 2009; UNESCO 2012; Werquin 2010) for introducing VPL systems, along with different studies for mapping the different experiences and reflections on how to improve the quality and credibility of VPL process in different (national) contexts. A lot of practices were already developed and there is a broad terminology related to the validation of prior learning experiences, thus becoming more difficult to analyze it for the purpose of different comparative studies. The European Commission staff working document on impact assessment of validation practices (2012) and in the Council of Europe (2012) Recommendations on the Validation of non-formal and informal learning mention that there is lack of comparability and coherence between the validation practices in the member states. It is proposed that the quality ensured validation procedures, quality standards for assessors, guidance and counseling, access to validation, stakeholder involvement, specific target groups and the European dimension of validation should be ensured.

Different models were described and developed. For instance, Duvekot (2011) speaks about a multi-targeted approach with three possible modes: *reflective VPL* (it takes the whole learning biography of an individual as the focus for building up a portfolio and

action plan); a *summative VPL* (building up a portfolio against a pre-set standard, looking for access and exemptions), and a *formative VPL* (meeting up with a portfolio to a standard for deciding on what/where/how to learn further).

While implementing a certain approach on VPL, universities have to take into account the existing practices of NARIC centers for recognition and equivalence of certificates and diplomas issuing in different countries. NARIC focuses on the equivalence of different certificates, while the VPL process is more complex, encompassing the learning biography as a whole and the related competencies, most of the time not quantified, credited or recognized. Nevertheless, in the European Area for Recognition Manual (2012, p.59), practical guidelines are offered for a fair recognition of even non-formal learning and flexible learning pathways and related learning outcomes, insisting on the role of the well trained professionals for performing a competent recognition. In the figure below the aspects to be taken into account are listed, with related recommendations for linking also with competent recognition authority in different countries:

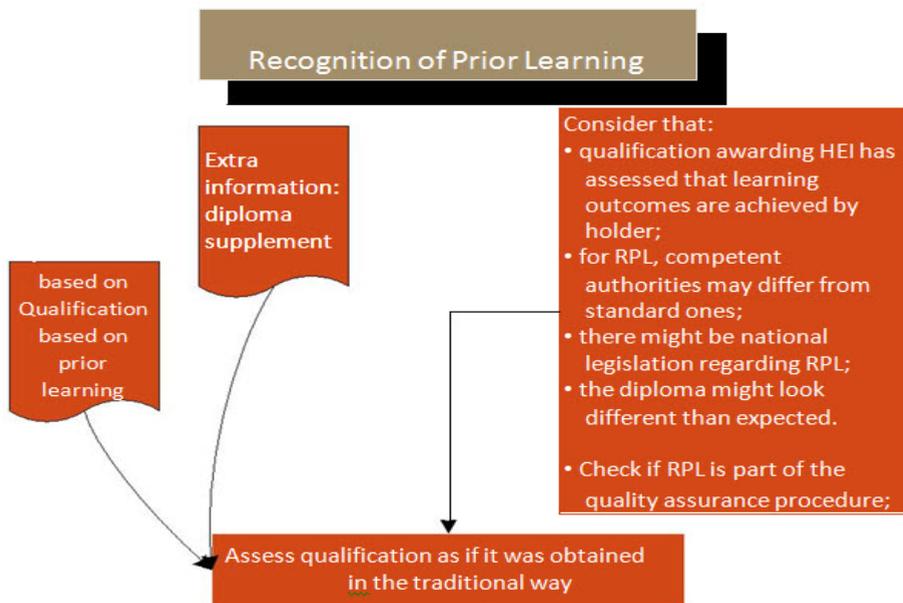


Figure 2. Recognition of prior learning in universities (Nuffic 2012, p.59)

*“The recognition of prior learning in the context of higher education can have two different purposes: firstly, to allow students to gain admission to a higher education institution and, secondly, to allow students to demonstrate that they have met, partially or completely, the requirements of a higher education programme” (EC, 2011, p.47).*

A bottom up approach was piloted in the framework of the European Master in Adult Education at the West University of Timisoara, between 2006-2013. Lacking formal procedures, it was depending very much on the colleagues teaching at this master to agree to introduce the recognition and validation practices at the course they taught. There were many students older than 25 years, with large experience in teaching adults or interacting with adults for educational purposes. With the experience in piloting Validpack, the tools could be adopted for the course specifics. For countries like Romania, where the regulations for VPL do not apply to higher education yet, it is up to the universities and coordinators of programs, to the teachers themselves, based on their autonomy, to use partly such possibility, as motivational and developmental tool for their students, mostly for the ones having practical experiences.

The *ESRALE* project (“European Studies and Research in Adult and Learning Education”, an Erasmus project, coordinated by the University of Kaiserslautern, in partnership with universities from 9 countries, between 2013-2016) explores how the access to the master level of the practitioners in adult education can be facilitated, bringing upon the experience of running the European Master in Adult Education. Such insular bottom-up solution is to be extended wider.

As it was shown in the ALLinHE project, the situation is very different in different countries, quite easy to implement such tool in countries like The Netherlands, Denmark, Portugal, once the regulations allow this, but for other countries it can be considered that the bottom-up approach is experimentation. The documented reflections on such experimentation, with the relevant arguments, including the trends formulated in the European documents (EC, 2011; EUA, 2008), can provide a viable approach to argue for VPL as a useful solution for enlarging the access to higher education. The signals for such a need are more than obvious.

The universities, based on their autonomy, can set up at Senate levels such regulations on how the VPL can be used as facilitator of integrating the ALPs into the existing offers. They can define the accreditation criteria and the professional experience required for different study programs. The legislation in Romania does not explicitly mention VPL for universities, but neither forbids it. Therefore, universities as autonomous institutions, responsible for the quality of the qualifications they award and the conditions on which they are awarded, can set up such procedures. But as there is not a formal stipulation, universities hesitate to implement it. Even more than that, there is not only hesitation, but a big resistance, as it could be seen during the discussions and negotiations for adopting the National Qualification Framework. The universities were afraid to loose the monopoly of the certificates issued, even the market shows them that such practices already are implemented. The implementation of the National Qualifications Frameworks can have a significant impact on developments in the field of validation of prior learning for admission to higher education, as the NQFs are intended to clarify the content of different national qualifications (EC, 2011, p. 50).

To overcome the barriers of mentality regarding VPL and to ensure its credibility and acceptance, including the quality of such service, well-trained professionals are needed, supported by a good information system.

In the same way for all levels of implementation of the VPL, the professionals are to be trained in this respect. In universities, the professionals can be the ones from the departments of career guidance, but they can also be experienced professors, believing in such path, and familiarized with the validation process, and mainly experts of the content aspects, thus setting the relevant standards and criteria. Prerequisites for implementation of the VPL in universities exists, once the whole curricula is competency based and stipulating the learning outcomes, the diploma supplement stipulating also the most relevant competencies to be achieved at the end of the respective study program.

In its communication *Rethinking education: investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes* (European Commission, 2012b), the European Commission pointed out the need to improve the upgrading of competencies of professionals in higher education, as precondition for increased quality. The VPL professionals can be included among them. A possible bottom up approach is offered by the communities of practice, or what Cate Watson (2014) calls professional learning communities (PLC). A PLC is defined as 'a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way' (Watson 2014, apud Stoll, 2006).

In the case of professional assessors performing VPL in universities, a PLC can include the NARIC experts, as well as the practitioners in the evaluation centers performing VPL according to the national legislations. It supposes also the collaboration with colleagues from universities in countries where VPL has been largely introduced in the past. Watson (2014) considers that the communities of practice build on shared values and vision, on mutual trust, respect and support, openness, networks and partnership. This is easier to be implemented within the ESRALE project, as different universities collaborate for common and compatible study offers and have different degree of experience in implementing the VPL process due to different national regulations. Such colleagues can be "agents of change" in universities, as islands from the bottom, convincing other colleagues about such need and its benefits.

If PLCs prove to be a soft effective solution for teachers having already a qualification for their teaching profession, thus mastering the know-how, for the assessor running VPL in the Romanian university, as a newly introduced possible practice, a dedicated training is needed (see the concept developed in CAPIVAL as example), together with the set procedures and developed instruments.

Not only professionals are needed for a well functioning VPL in universities, but the whole infrastructure and information system needs to be set up, to be used wider. It is up to the future developments to prove if such solution will become functional and efficient reality. It is up not only the government to set up the formal framework, but up to the willingness and the determinate way of acting of the management of each university to implement such service.

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# The Nordic Network for Adult Learning (NVL) and the promotion of VPL

# 5

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## The role of networks in enhancing VPL as an access tool to learning opportunities and addressing challenges in the Nordic region

Antra Carlsen

The experiences of the Nordic Network for Adult Learning (NVL) with networks and networking in adult education acts as an effective means of addressing challenges in the Nordic region. The Nordic cooperation and the role of the Nordic Expert Network on Validation within this cooperation is described in this contribution. The Nordic Expert Network is an excellent way of pooling of resources and producing added value to national development work. The Network has developed Nordic recommendations on VPL for decision makers, and has been working with issues of quality assurance and competence development in validation. The NVL sets an example for transnational cooperation and development of policies and instrumentation for lifelong learning and VPL. Synergy with the work of the EU has been achieved through the consultation process on the European recommendation on validation.

### **Nordic cooperation**

The official Nordic cooperation dates back to the post-World War 2 period. Today the cooperation covers a number of areas like education, research, working life, health, environment, etc. The Nordic cooperation is political and built on common values and a willingness to achieve results that contribute to the dynamic development and increase of Nordic competencies and competitiveness. A common understanding of democracy, similar cultural patterns and shared social values are important underlying principles of Nordic cooperation and help to promote freedom of movement and to enhance skills, competitiveness and cohesion throughout the Region. Working together does not just put core Nordic values on the international agenda; it also helps to make the Region more visible and highlights the unique nature of the partnership, which provides benefits for citizens and users – both in the Region and beyond. The cooperation is funded by taxes from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The autonomous territories (Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland) also play an important part.

### **Nordic cooperation in adult education**

The advantages for *Norden* are substantial to have political and financial support to do more than is possible within one country. The Nordic governments put together

resources and support different areas of development. There are altogether ten different Councils of Ministers financing development work within areas like environment, fishery and forestry, energy industries, working life, social welfare and care, and also education and culture.

The current Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) Strategy Plan for Education and Research states that the Nordic cooperation<sup>1</sup> should foster research, innovation and use of green energy and modern technologies and regarding adult education (AE):

- should eliminate barriers and enhance free mobility for students, researchers and knowledge flow in the Nordic region,
- should enhance public – private partnerships in order to develop the competences of all citizens and enhance the (validation or) recognition of prior learning.

National experiences and initiatives are important in this context; they are the core and backbone of development. But when there is a possibility to put the different experiences together, analyse them and in the best case test them in other surroundings and circumstances – then new knowledge is created, or new angles found to the existing practice. This is a way of creating new and valuable knowledge through cooperation. In the light of the Nordic cooperation it means also bringing about added Nordic value. VPL is one of the fields which has been high on the priority agenda of the Nordic cooperation. The countries recognize the benefits of developing the national policies and systems hand in hand with the closest neighbors, and also invest in joint research and analyses projects.

The resources allocated to adult learning - practice and policy development – are channeled through several programmes. The Nordic Committee of Senior Officials for Education and Research (EK-U) is the steering group in the field and set the priorities for the Nordic Network for Adult Learning (NVL), a network organization supporting the realization of the NCM strategy. NVL's task is to spread the knowledge about and implement the Nordic policies within the field of adult education and learning.

([www.nordvux.net](http://www.nordvux.net))

Next to this, there is another programme supporting lifelong learning in the Nordic region called *Nordplus* – a cooperation programme for projects and exchange of learners, educators and scholars. ([www.nordplusonline.org](http://www.nordplusonline.org))

### **The Nordic Network for Adult Learning (NVL)**

The Nordic Network for Adult Learning (NVL) unites all the five Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden) and the three autonomous areas (Åland Islands, Faroes, Greenland). NVL is a programme initiated in 2005, financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) and administrated by the Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning (Vox). The objectives of NVL strive towards promoting lifelong learning by focusing on cross-sectoral cooperation in the priority areas defined by the NCM, like

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1 «Kunnskap for grønn vekst og velferd», Ministerrådet for utdanning og forskning (MR-U) strategi for utdannings- og forskningsområdet i perioden 2011–2013.

flexibility in adult learning, workplace-based learning, guidance counseling, recognition of prior learning, validation of non-formal and in-formal learning, innovations in adult education.

NVL highlights Nordic expertise and disseminates experiences and innovations through Nordic meeting places, creates new co-operation models and supports networking. NVL coordinates twelve sub-networks which are thematically connected to the issues prioritized by the Nordic governments. NVL transmits competence and experiences between the five Nordic countries and the three autonomous areas. The task of the network is to deepen Nordic competence, and extend the effects to the Baltic region and the rest of Europe.

NVL is a decentralized network organization with national coordinators in all five Nordic countries and contact persons in the autonomous territories. Each coordinator works within a specific thematic area at the Nordic level and has the responsibility for 1 - 2 Nordic networks. This is a relatively new form of organizing learning and Nordic adult education cooperation which has proven to be efficient, dynamic and innovative. NVL's experience shows that the decentralized and flexible network structure allows fast flow of information and knowledge among all the involved actors. The possibility to contribute with own experience, to build on one's own experience and needs, as well as to gain new knowledge and inspiration from others has been a highly motivating factor. The interests of the network members are not necessarily alike but they agree upon and pursue a common goal, helping each other in the process of reaching this goal. This form of working has ensured both a creative work process and also high quality results, which in turn increase the interest among the adult education organizations in the whole Nordic region and support the growth of the volume of activities and number of active cooperation partners.

### **Nordic Competence Project about the role of networking**

Networking has been pointed out as one of the eight success factors in education initiatives meeting challenges in society and working life: *"A project is likely to be more successful if it is based on a network initiative, planned and implemented by someone who share the same interests, or have mutual benefits. Networking between different stakeholders is usually a better guarantee for funding, more active participation, better contents and outcomes."*<sup>2</sup>, states the Nordic group of researchers (Manninen, Árnason, Liveng, Green) involved in NVL's Nordic Competence Project 2009 – 2012.

The main goal of the project has been to identify and analyse good adult learning practice examples that have addressed changes and crisis in society and working life and contributed to preserving a Nordic Model of the welfare society. The analyses presents eight major characteristic factors that have contributed to the fact that education and

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2 Analyses of Nordic Educational Projects designed to meet challenges in society. Defining the Success Factors, NVL (2012)

training has succeeded in strengthening both individuals and organisations in the perspective of managing 'change and crisis'.

The project report states that there is a need to turn individuals' life and work environments into learning environments. Many low-skilled individuals are in employment and can be reached at the workplace. In SME-s on-the-job training is a good solution but there is a need for co-operation between workplaces and adult learning providers regarding skills that cannot be learned in enterprises.

The analysis has revealed that networking generates new ideas and/or helps to put them into practice. This success factor is also connected to another one because it motivates the generation of "new roles" for organisations. For example, a new combination of liberal and vocational studies has proved to be a successful innovation, which is based on networking.

The Competence Project also shows that networking has helped to motivate the members of the involved organisations to participate in the programmes. For example, in the *Noste programme* in Finland trade unions were crucial for motivating low-skilled workers to study, and employer organisations were instrumental in convincing their members to provide support and study leaves for their employees. Networking helped to maintain commitment to the programmes, and also to provide easier access to different places, like apprenticeship placements in the Finnish Entrepreneurs' Apprenticeship project.

Networking also enabled and secured funding, either by having funding partners (state, regional administration or companies) as members of the network, or by making funding applications by networks more attractive and successful.

### **Networks set focus on specific and prioritized policy fields and initiate development**

NVL networks are directly linked to the thematic priorities of the NCM within adult education. NVL has 12 thematic sub-networks; they function as a link between policy and practice, initiate development projects, are a forum for dialogue and a meeting place. The networks respond to the national or regional needs through the network members and their organisations, and collectively address actual Nordic challenges.

*The Nordic Expert Network on Validation* is among those who have been active since the start of the NVL and achieved considerable results in several fields. The network has contributed to the validation system development through the period 2005 – 2007 through the learning practice exchange, mapping of national practices and systematic comparison among the Nordic countries, and gap analyses. The survey "Validation in the Nordic countries - Policy and Practice" (Andersson, Hult. 2008) discusses the concepts and describes the differences within the validation systems in the Nordic countries as well as raises several important issues; e.g. how traditional education can develop in relation to validation and individualisation, how validation can be economically profitable, and how education institutions can organise education and make budgets so that validation and individualised education do not become problems and obstacles in the work of education providers.

*The Nordic Expert Network on Validation* has been especially active in providing evidence and input for policy making. The Network has focused on policy work during 2008 – 2010 and has come up with agreed fifteen Nordic recommendations to the decision makers “Challenges in the work of recognition/validation of prior learning in the Nordic countries” (NVL, 2010). This memorandum is based on Nordic national reports from all the countries which were prepared during the spring of 2009. Besides identifying common challenges the memorandum points out which common challenges can be addressed at the Nordic level. Most of the challenges have by now been appropriately addressed and recommendations followed by the Nordic countries, still the Network closely monitors the developments within validation in the Nordic countries, linking their work to the EQF / NQF discussion and other networks. The network members have also provided input at the EU policy level by commenting the draft of the “European Guidelines on the Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning” due to be launched in 2014.

The current focus of the network is on reaching the milestone of fully functioning validation systems in the Nordic region by 2018, and the ways of measuring progress towards this goal. The expert network has been developing ‘*The Roadmap 2018*’, which should be used as an instrument for checking how far the individual countries are in the development work, but it can also be used for benchmarking between countries and their various systems for validation.

‘*The Roadmap 2018*’ provides a broader perspective on the validation and the intention is to give a picture of how validation works in the national or Nordic context. Validation is not just about making skills visible, communicating the results is equally important and should be applied where necessary. A supporting infrastructure is crucial for this purpose. Besides benefiting validation it is equally important for the education sector and skills matching against the labour market needs.

The Roadmap focuses on a number of indicators that are relevant to the national development of validation and support the utilization of its results. The hope of the Nordic expert network on validation is that it will inspire a holistic and accelerated development which ultimately strengthens the position of *Norden* as an innovative, inclusive and high competence region.

The indicators should target a wide range of stakeholders and show the level of involvement of the stakeholders, like the state, the social partners, businesses, regional and local authorities and educational institutions. All of these are interested in modern and effective competence development and skills supply according to the needs. The state and the society also have their interest in integrating different groups in the society and using public funds as efficiently as possible.

The expectation of the expert network on validation is that the indicators would allow disclosing and following up on the issues like information, access and quality of validation, and monitor reaching the goal of a holistic and well-functioning validation system when:

- validating increases individual's motivation and strengthens the ability to participate in the society;
- validation fulfils its main purpose of increasing access to and adaptation of education, and thereby contributes to employability;
- validation is used to improve the opportunities for education and work of weaker and disadvantaged groups;
- validation is a natural part of LLL and is used in broader contexts, e.g., when structural changes of the labour market occur;
- validation is used in education and working life as a strategic tool for effective competence development.

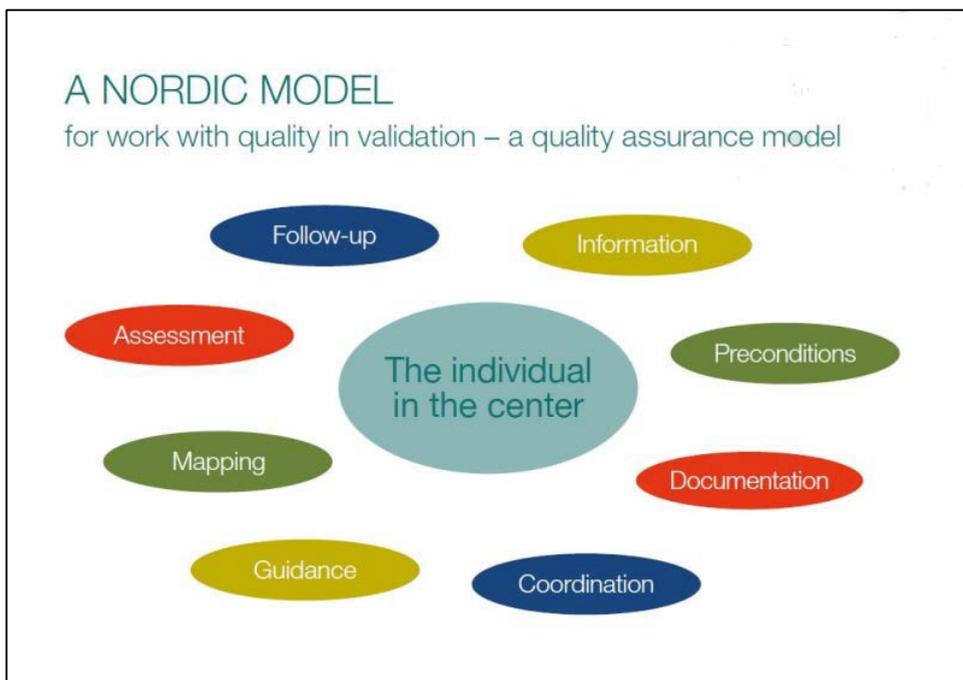
The work on '*the Roadmap 2018*' and the indicators is expected to be finished by the end of 2014 and can be followed on the NVL website.

### **Expert network - pooling of resources for quality development**

Through pooling of resources, access to expertise, collective knowledge and broad dissemination networks can respond to arising national or regional challenges in a fast and efficient way. Results can then be used to make a call for a political and/or structural change as well as serve as guidelines for next generation of projects and new initiatives. When the key actors and organisations in all five Nordic countries realise a specific need and agree upon its importance, the created solutions become highly relevant in all countries. Besides, the solutions can be implemented in a cost efficient way due to the collaboration. The relevance is an essential precondition if the countries want to move, for example, from a pilot to a more mainstream offer. As concerns the cost efficiency, the Nordic countries can produce results in a collaborative way using the specific competence in each country within a common programme framework, and the participants in all five countries can benefit from such a product. By working this way networks can also create good preconditions for the Nordic region being successful on implementing the EU recommendations on following up on the Action Plan, e.g. concerning scaling-up the innovation and turning measures/pilots/initiatives into regional and national programmes.

*The Nordic Expert Network on Validation* has been promoting VPL and increasing the implementation. And has also put strong focus on setting professional standards in validation, including competence development and ensuring quality. The network has recently been involved in a mapping project, which shows that quality assurance of validation concerns a large number of factors among them legislation, policy, financing, co-operation among institutions, co-operation between stakeholders, etc. It is also important that employees, who work professionally with validation, possess the competencies and qualifications necessary for being able to perform their work professionally using reliable and valid methodologies. Furthermore, it is imperative that working with validation methods is performed in an ethical and justifiable manner with consequence and according to clear and transparent procedures. A Nordic quality model

has therefore been created to ensure the discussion about these issues and developing the practice in the institutions dealing with the validation of prior learning (VPL).



The quality model is designed for use in relation with quality assurance, primarily in educational institutions. The model is a tool for those employees and professionals, who work with validation in practice, together with those leaders, who bear the overall and staff related responsibility for validation at the educational institution.<sup>3</sup> *The Nordic Expert Network on Validation Network* will continue working on further testing and developing the model, and through this process ensure also the professionalization of the staff (see: <http://www.nordvux.net/tema/aktuella-tema/validering>).

### Increased access and effective response to needs

The population of the Nordic region is 25,1 million inhabitants (2012). *Norden* is a scarcely populated region with the only exception of Denmark, which has 130 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>. Sweden, Norway and Finland has between 16 and 23 persons per km<sup>2</sup>, Island has 3,5, while there are only 0,14 Greenlanders per km<sup>2</sup> in the ice-free area of Greenland.

These conditions pose some serious challenges for learning provision and participation in LLL. Also in terms of competence and quality development within VPL there are specific regional geographic challenges. The study carried out by The Danish Evaluation Institute

3 Kvalitetsmodell för validering, NVR (2013)

(EVA) “Competence development of employees/staff involved in RPL” describe the APL practice in the Nordic countries and also present several network-based initiatives for staff professionalisation.<sup>4</sup>

In the region of Nordland in Norway the competence development of employees working with VPL is going on through a network. The advisers working with APL are brought together once or twice a year. There is a special budget for meetings, courses and conferences. The network participants share experiences, gain new knowledge and discuss particularly difficult cases, etc. The networks are indispensable, in particular they are valuable for small branches / education subjects with very few validations carried out per year.

In Iceland the Education and Training Service Centre (ETSC) is the developer of a national strategy for validation and works in close cooperation with the network of lifelong learning centres around the country and in cooperation with the formal school system. Iceland is working on validating real competence of groups of experienced trade workers all over the country. Counseling is offered for people at the workplace and for unemployed in Iceland. ETSC is responsible for the quality assurance of the validation process as well as the training of assessors. It is advisable for the counsellor and assessor to receive training in operational procedures for validation of competence and for them to be well informed on the process. Courses (15 lessons) help to meet increasing demand for validation and broaden the network of professionals. Regular national gatherings are arranged by ETSC for the counselors involved in APL in Iceland.

### **VPL as a motivating factor**

In order to get more evidence about the results of validation the Expert Network commissioned a study (case analyses) on the effects of validation targeting specific groups, and validation relating to flexibility in working life. The central concepts that have been the starting point in the analysis are inclusion, mobility, flexibility, empowerment, and employability. The result shows good examples of validation that empower and include specific target groups, such as immigrants, prisoners, unskilled, and persons with reading and writing problems, in working life. This is often implemented by improving their formal educational level, and thereby their employability. The cases further show that initiatives to improve mobility and flexibility can be found in the private sector, e.g. banking, finance, and industry, and in the public sector, e.g. among paramedics and mail staff. However, the results are still small in scope and rather scattered. Besides, there are also challenges on a societal level, e.g. related to structural economic aspects, and on an individual level, e.g. resistance and suspicion in relation to the educational system, and difficulties in communication, problems that could be barriers in the development of the validation practice.

Nordic countries are characterized by a highly skilled labour market, the staff are the most important investment and the precondition for productivity. Historically the Nordic

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4 «Anerkendelse af real-kompetencer i nordiskt perspektiv» (2010) Dansk Evalueringsinstitut (EVA)

labour markets have been less regulated than elsewhere in Europe, which means that there is a greater proportion of qualifications that are acquired through non-formal learning. All individuals' competencies must be made visible and used. In order to achieve that the relevant infrastructure must be created.

The strong Nordic tradition of non-formal adult learning is known far beyond the region, both as a form of learning for personal development and also as means for acquiring competences like leadership, creativity, sense of responsibility, independent thinking and decision making, etc. Such competences motivate individuals for further personal and professional development, and are also highly appreciated in the labour market. Therefore the issues of VPL are relevant for the non-formal adult education sector in the Nordic countries. Currently, there is a Nordic task force looking at the ways of making the "bonus competences" visible and discussing the ways of describing them. Several projects that deal with competences acquired outside the formal school system or vocational training are being examined, and the pros and cons making such competences visible and recognized are being discussed. The Nordic expert network on validation will take on board the results of this work and bring them into the broader context of VPL policy and practice in the Nordic countries.

A more widespread use of VPL as a means of increasing mobility within the working life in the Nordic region is also supported by the labour market organisations. This conclusion is the result of the consultation process carried out by a working group within NVL during 2013. The findings of the working group will be further discussed in NVL and the Nordic Expert Network on Validation.

The Nordic Council of Ministers mandate to NVL is to promote dialogue and cooperation among different sectors of adult learning, and to enhance dialogue between the representatives of working life and adult education providers. This is a very relevant ambition taking into account the learning needs and patterns of modern society and it should contribute to boosting the competitiveness of the Nordic countries within a global context. This is not an easy ambition to realise; NVL has taken it on board and experience shows that it takes time to reach results but it is possible.

### **Networks attract interest of new partners and sectors**

The international research community agrees that there is too little evidence on the results and effects of RPL and there is a need for more in-depth research as well as statistics and analyses. Economist and researcher, former OECD specialist on RPL Patrick Werquin stated at an International Conference on Validation in Oslo in 2012: " – *Unfortunately, with the exceptions of France, Portugal and some other countries, there is very little data on the subject.*"<sup>5</sup>

Two surveys provide some positive results from validation and certification in France. The main findings were:

- Certified unemployed people gain employment faster than those not certified, but the effect is limited.

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5 Proceedings from International Conference on Validation, March 5th to March 7th, Oslo, Norway (2012)

- There is some evidence that participants continue, or are motivated to continue, with formal education after the process.
- The surveys offer little evidence that people going through APEL (Accreditation of prior learning) processes achieve higher wages.
- Participants gain a lot of personal benefits like self-esteem and confidence.

The data so far point to little *second chance-potential*. The surveys showed that the lower the level of initial competences, the less participants benefited from validation.

Equity and equal access to learning is high on the educational agenda in the Nordic region, which also has determined the focus of the Nordic study commissioned by the Nordic Expert Network on validation in 2012. It has focused on the existing research in validation as well as case analyses showing the effects of validation. The results are to be used for raising awareness about the results of validation (at personal, social and economic levels) as well as about the validation process itself.

A review of research has been carried out and shows that validation research has mainly been conducted in Sweden, with a few additional examples from the other Nordic countries. The data from Sweden is mostly qualitative (2012)<sup>6</sup>. This research has applied varying theoretical perspectives to interpret different aspects of the validation process. Theories on learning, governing, communication, gender, organising, and validity, have been used to develop the understanding of validation. Considering the efforts made for developing validation in practice, further development could be expected also when it comes to research. This could contribute further to understanding and development of Nordic validation practice and conditions for lifelong learning. The challenge is of course getting resources for research, but also getting researchers interested in the field.

### **Synergies among networks**

We have experienced an organic process of growth and development of different networks under the auspices of NVL. The networks have become strong and competent units in the Nordic adult learning cooperation. Several of the NVL networks have gone beyond developing their own specific thematic competence area and have searched for cooperation possibilities and synergies between and among networks.

The prioritized fields of validation and guidance counseling are examples of deepened cooperation between two networks at the national and Nordic levels. From all Nordic countries Iceland is especially keen on practicing and stressing the importance that a counsellor takes part in the validation process and guides the individual on how to identify his/her competence and document it. For those who have great work experience it is quite a job to put their competence into words. Professionals do the analysis on the status and confirmation of competence. The final validation and recognition is in the hands of various stakeholders, for example schools, education providers, and companies. Iceland has carried out two internet-based studies and show the high level of satisfaction among the participants about the close links between the VPL process and counselling. The results of the studies are used for constant improvement of validation process in

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6 Nordisk forskning och exempel på validering (2012). Docent Per Andersson och fil.dr Tova Stenlund

Iceland but also as an inspiration in other Nordic countries. <sup>7</sup> This type of practice is brought to further discussion at a Nordic arena, facilitated by two NVL networks. Networks and networking possess enormous potentials in terms of information sharing, competence development and policy work. It is up to the members to use the networking according to their needs and for the benefit and added value of the membership and beyond.

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7 Proceedings from Nordisk Vägledningskonferens "Vägledarnas kompetenser i kulturell mångfald och på en arbetsmarknad i förändring", 14 - 15 mars 2013, Göteborg



# Validation for empowerment and participation in *'the learning society'*

# 6

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**The potential of the UNESCO Guidelines for the recognition, validation and accreditation of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning**

Madhu Singh

## **Introduction**

This contribution has two main purposes: to examine the progress made in member states in terms of the *UNESCO Guidelines for the recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of non-formal and informal learning* (UIL, 2012) and to highlight some key recommendations for education systems, emerging from the country analysis.

The title of this contribution is *Validation for empowerment and participation in 'the learning society'*. The 'Faure Report' (Faure et al, 1972) defines the learning society as one in which learning is valued by all members of society, in which stakeholders invest in recognising and developing human learning potential and everyone regards people's non-formal and informal learning as a cornerstone of lifelong learning strategies. Faure argued that the educational system would need complete overhauling if the learning society is to be reached.

A majority of countries are introducing mechanisms for the recognition, validation and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning as part of wider education reforms. These reforms typically seek to make education and training better reduce the education-job gap but also make lifelong learning a real possibility for individuals. An important aspect of this is to increase opportunities for everyone to enter education and attain specified outcomes, be they standard indicators of school attainment or broader parameters, including environmental health, cultural education and those relating to the world of work and life.

## **Conceptual framework**

The conceptual frameworks used are the core principles and action areas from the UNESCO Guidelines. They provide a template to identify the critical factors in implementation, as well as obstacles and difficulties that need to be removed to ensure the smooth functioning of RVA. They present the strategic direction relevant for public policy planning with regard to RVA.

The core values highlighted in the UNESCO Guidelines for recognising, validating and accrediting non-formal and informal learning (UIL, 2014, p. 4) are:

- 'Ensuring equity and inclusiveness in access to learning opportunities';
- 'Promoting the equal value of learning outcomes from formal, non-formal and informal learning';
- 'Ensuring the centrality of individuals in the RVA process';
- 'Improving flexibility and openness of formal education and training';
- 'Promoting quality assurance in the entire RVA process';
- Strengthening partnerships among all stakeholders (Ibid. p.4).

In addition, the UNESCO Guidelines suggest six areas of action in Member States:

1. 'Establishing RVA as a key component of a national lifelong learning strategy
2. Developing RVA systems that are accessible to all
3. Making RVA integral to education and training systems
4. Creating a coordinated national structure involving all stakeholders.
5. Building capacity of RVA personnel
6. Designing sustainable funding mechanisms'

The educational challenges foreseen by UNESCO several decades ago continue to exist. In fact they are more urgent now. One of the challenges for countries and economies throughout the world today is growing social inequalities. One way to reduce inequalities is to improve participation and empowerment through deployability and employability of people. The acquisition of self-awareness – who we are and how to use our talents – is a precondition of deployability and employability that are mostly developed in non-formal and informal settings be promoted. Deployability denotes the potential to increase our general capability as person in order to enhance our contribution and participation in society. Broadening the scope of recognition, validation and accreditation to include all types of learning outside the mainstream mutually reinforces human capability in a society and the opportunities that the society offers. Through self-awareness, people become agents in society (Sen, 2000). Lave and Wenger (1991) see learning as a result of participation in “communities of practice” in which learning cannot be reduced to the passive reception of items of knowledge. The notion of agency presupposes social capital and social networks. A feature of learning in non-formal and informal learning settings is the development at the individual level of the capability to mobilise resources, i.e. other people/institutions/technologies in order to address arising challenges (Livingstone and Guile, 2012, p. 357).

RVA needs to be seen in relation to broader strategic issues at the level of regulatory frameworks on the one hand, and learning assessment, curriculum, and pedagogy, on the other hand. RVA should not be seen in terms of only short-term technical or operational issues.

## The six Areas of Actions

### **1. Action Area One: establishing RVA as a key component of a national lifelong learning strategy**

In the UNESCO Guidelines it is suggested that member states:

*'...develop a national lifelong learning strategy, facilitate the development of national references or standards that integrate the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning, and, based on the national context, establish a national qualifications framework (NQF); and develop equivalencies between the outcomes of formal, non-formal and informal learning in the national references, standards or NQFs through a shared understanding of learning outcomes.'* (UIL, 2012, pp. 4-6).

*How are countries perceiving and defining their lifelong learning strategies and legislation?*

The key elements of the lifelong learning strategy in Norway, Finland, France and Denmark include RVA legislation. One of the typical features of legislation in these countries is the right given to every individual to apply for RVA. Legislation targets specific groups, such as adults lacking secondary education (France, Norway), i.e. adults, who may benefit from participating in a process of recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Another feature is the wide involvement of several stakeholders at both national and local levels (e.g. the role of regional authorities in France), and end-users (e.g., employers), in both preparatory work and in work concerning the formalities of the law. This ensures societal recognition, acceptance and ownership in the RVA process. Moreover, legislation comes from the involvement of stakeholders both from the world of work (including community and volunteering "work") and the world of education. Finally, legislation is considered to be a way to communicate to the wider world the value of the RVA process (Werquin, 2012).

Not all countries necessarily link RVA activity to governmental policy and legislative activity. A significant level of RVA activity is undertaken in the USA, for instance, despite a lack of relevant government policies or legislation.

There are also those countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, the UK and South Africa, particularly the first generation developers of NQFs, which have institutionalised RVA as a standard and a requirement of any accredited training within the NQF. In New Zealand, the thrust of lifelong learning policy is centred on enabling flexibility in learning pathways through the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (Keller, 2013). This is also a growing trend in many developing countries, where, in fact, NQFs are being developed to make RVA happen. In Mauritius and Namibia, governments expect to mainstream RVA within their education and training system through legislation establishing NQFs.

Werquin (2012) has shown that NQF legislation alone is not able to ensure that RVA is taken on board; other legislations specific to RVA are needed to enlighten users about the vision of the processes such as assessment, financing and guidance and counselling

as is done in France. Werquin (2012) has highlighted that in the French case there are several other laws, such as the Law of Decentralisation accompanying the Modernisation Law of 2002, which have given stakeholders and providers the power to implement RVA (Werquin, 2012).

In contrast to the context in the developed North outlined above, most countries in the developing South, with the notable exception of Mexico and the Republic of Korea, still lack specific legislation(s) on RVA. Namibia has developed a set of Guidelines on RPL, but Guidelines and RPL policies, as Werquin (2012) points out, do not have the same currency as law.

Although there has been a growing interest in the development of lifelong learning strategies and legislation in the South, these strategies deliver *access* to non-formal *provision* for early school-leavers as a second chance to enter the education system, rather than making RVA a right through the *assessment and validation* of the competences and learning that adults and youth already possess.

#### *How are countries defining the purposes of RVA?*

UNESCO's perspectives on lifelong learning and education for sustainable development both imply an integrative approach with the potential to draw together the various sectors and purposes of personal, social and economic development. Moreover, both concepts are underpinned by values of self-esteem and responsibility, respect for difference, solidarity, dialogue and exploration. Unfortunately, countries frequently focus on particular aspects of RVA as discrete fields or prioritise a single particular aspect.

Using an integrative and holistic approach RVA's contribution to participation and empowerment can be seen in terms of:

- promoting participation in further education and training and access to qualifications;
- promoting workforce development and participation in the labour market;
- social inclusion and democratic citizenship;
- personal and professional empowerment.

In the educational context, progression through access to formal qualifications still remains the key aspect of RVA. The formal education sector is in the forefront of RVA. Many countries are committed to developing RVA as a policy tool alongside other measures with the aim of enhancing the transparency and sustainability of the education and broader learning system (Austria, Mauritius, Botswana, Namibia); promoting a diversified lifelong learning system; granting flexible access opportunities; establishing synergies between formal and non-formal basic education (Philippines and Thailand); promoting permeability and educational mobility between subsystems of the education and training system; and acknowledging the importance of work experience and vocational skills for achieving qualifications in higher education (Germany). More and more providers in the field of continuing vocational education and training are delivering support services which enable adults to use RVA at all levels of the formal

education and training system (Denmark and Finland) in addition to providing certified qualifications.

In workforce development RVA is used in rehabilitation courses administered through employment agencies, with close collaborative ties between qualification systems/frameworks and CVET providers. RVA is also used by training providers in particular industries. It is a feature of collective agreements in the private and public sector. It is used for linking non-credit workforce programmes to educational credit. RVA's importance has also been highlighted in matching labour market competence requirements to the competence profiles of employment seekers. In many countries RVA is used for attracting migrants to fill labour gaps. RVA has been shown to meet part of new qualification requirements in different sectors (e.g., for adult educators; construction, or social services). RVA has supported workers in the private and public sector organisations to complete primary and upper secondary education (Denmark). In the informal economy, RVA helps in the acquisition of vocational and occupational certificates based on previous work experience and informal apprenticeships. The integration of academic credit with non-credit workforce programmes is driving governments to develop national competency-based reference frameworks, learning outcomes-based approaches to curricula and learner databases (USA).

In the area of social inclusion, RVA is used both as a tool to increase the number of persons with higher education, as well as to target special groups in order to close the gap between different sections of the community, particularly immigrant groups, indigenous populations, rural groups, low-qualified workers 'young leavers at risk' and those trapped in the poverty cycle. In the latter approach, recognition is an important tool for the promotion of inclusion.

The use of RVA to promote equality of access and participation in education is often driven by wider policy frameworks or contexts such as under-qualified young people entering the labour market; recognising the skills of learning and qualifications of migrant workers and refugees, tackling the economic crisis and targeting young unemployed persons who need to achieve mobility on the labour market.

Beyond the bounds of these external dimensions of personal development, RVA contributes to self-esteem, confidence and motivation, greater awareness, improving personal reflection, increased confidence and self-directed learning management. A diversity of approaches exists to support recognition of competences and outcomes from non-formal and informal learning, as well as a diversity of options to access education, training and qualifications. This multiplicity of forms of recognition systems across sectors, and addressing a broad range of purposes (personal, social, cultural and economic), is a prerequisite for the realisation of lifelong learning within an integrative perspective.

*How are countries using NQFs to widen participation through the recognition, validation and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning?*

The current intense period of interest in the continuing development of national qualification frameworks has prompted the development of mechanisms for recognition,

validation and accreditation. The formation of national qualifications authorities and quality assurance agencies as gatekeepers of national and sectoral qualifications are important steps as they have opened the door to the much needed recognition of non-formal and informal learning whereby all learning can be recognised regardless of the way it is required. Singh and Duvekot (2013) have highlighted the diversity of approaches in the linking of RVA to national reference points. They identified the following discrete approaches:

1. The first group of countries, where RVA is an accepted route to qualifications, consists of Australia, New Zealand, France, Portugal, Finland, Scotland, South Africa, Mauritius and Namibia.
2. The second group of countries consists of European countries, which are in the process of referencing their NQFs to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The EQF is viewed as an opportunity to integrate non-formal and informal learning into the national qualifications frameworks of their countries.
3. A third group of countries comprises those where recognition of an individual's learning outcomes and competences based on education and training curricula can be directly linked to a nationally established higher education qualifications (Hong Kong and Malaysia); In Hong Kong SAR university continuing education departments are falling under the Qualifications Framework regulations, in terms of the programmes they offer, especially in relation to Associate Degrees and Higher Diplomas.
4. The fourth *group* includes countries with approaches that recognise learning outcomes which relate to skills and occupational standards in specific economic sectors.
5. In the fifth group of countries, shifting to competence-based approaches in NQFs has made the recognition of relevant skills and knowledge more achievable.
6. *The sixth group* comprises those countries which, like the USA and Canada, do not possess a learning outcomes-based national qualifications framework, but where RVA processes have been established within educational institutions. In Canada, universities and colleges have been given authority to be the gatekeepers of credentials that reflect the achievement of specific levels of knowledge and skills in disciplinary-fields (Wong, 2011). In the USA, opportunities for RVA exist in degree completion institutions, where students can transfer in credits earned from a variety of accredited institutions from different states, including PLA credits (Travers, 2011). There are however some institutions designing degree programmes around student learning outcomes, or competences, rather than college credits. These institutions grant degrees based on what students have demonstrated that they know and can do. At this time, however, only a small number of US institutions offer competence-based programmes (Ganzglass, Bird and Prince, 2011).

NQFs serve the labour market with skilled labour, provide a means to recognise learning that takes place outside the formal education sector, and help those who have dropped out of the academic system to receive training oriented more strongly towards

vocational practice. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning thus becomes a key issue in NQF developments. Within knowledge-based economies, parallel and divergent tendencies are apparent whereby labour markets associated with specific occupations (such as IT software engineering) drive internationally recognised individual competences to take over formal education and training programmes (Brockmann, 2011). Internationally recognised individual competences of this kind require vocationally-oriented frameworks for their recognition.

Most countries are shifting from “integrated” frameworks to “bridging” or overarching frameworks, whereby NQFs are seen as systems of coordination, collaboration and communication, wherein different sectors are able to follow sector-specific approaches but continue to be guided within a nationally coherent system.

## **2. Action Area Two: Developing RVA systems that are accessible to all**

It is suggested that Member States:

*‘...develop procedures that identify, document, assess, validate and accredit learning outcomes, giving due consideration to those from experiential learning, self-directed learning and other forms of learning outside of formal education and training institutions; make use of both formative assessment (which draws more attention to identification, and documentation of learning progress and gives feedback to learners) and summative assessment (which aims explicitly to validate and recognise learning outcomes, leading to qualification); offer information, guidance and counseling services to clarify RVA procedures so that individuals become more aware of their own competences and more motivated to learn further and to have their learning outcomes recognized’ (UIL, 2012, p. 5).*

Countries from across the world utilise a range of effective measures to validate, accredit and recognise learning, and while it is difficult to come up with a single “best practice” model, a range of important features, themes and principles, and successful aspects of different recognition processes have emerged in the individual country examples presented which can be usefully shared between countries. However, these features need to be placed in the context of the degree of development of RVA in the countries. For purposes of facilitating a learning process, three groups of countries can be categorised: A group of countries with a high degree of development of RVA practices: Scotland, England, Denmark, Finland, France, Republic of Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Canada, and the USA. A group of countries with a medium degree of development of RVA practice. In these countries, RVA is gaining momentum with the development of national policies and learning outcome and competence-based approaches: such as Mauritius, Namibia, the Philippines, Thailand and Japan. In another group of countries, including Bangladesh, Burkina Faso and Benin, RVA is still under construction.

The utilisation of agreed standards or benchmarks is an important feature of RVA. One example of agreed standards is a general agreement on national curricula. Workplace-

specific competence demands – i.e. the competences that are necessary to perform specific tasks, such as operating certain machines, or serving customers – are another. Regardless of context, and whether it is for licensure, employment, credit or qualification, there is a need to have clear criteria for both learners and assessors so that the object of assessment is identified to all those involved.

The purpose of an assessment must be clear. It is only fair to the individual and the organisation/institution to tie assessments to specific learning or performance-based outcomes. Appropriate evaluation tools can then be used to consider how learners could gain recognition and credit for their existing skills and knowledge. Learners need to understand the rationale for their RVA.

Assessment based on learning outcomes has become an important quality issue in developing RVA systems. In Japan, the purpose of assessment is not to select the best, but rather to provide an opportunity for learners to show what they are able to do. Combining traditional methods and tests with other methods such as practical demonstrations has allowed relatively flexible procedures. Each assessment tool has its strengths and weaknesses. It is important to match the assessment tool to the purpose of the assessment and in some cases, to the nature of the learner. In some cases requiring individuals to create large portfolios, for example, will prove inappropriate. While there is a growing use of portfolio methods, applicants are also turning to simpler devices, requiring only a few pages, to demonstrate their ability to meet standards. Language can be an impediment to the successful completion of portfolios. There is also discussion in many countries on how methods of portfolio assessment might be improved in order to increase openness and transparency and to better enable individuals to describe their current knowledge, skills and motivation.

An important feature is the growing tendency towards continuity from *formative assessment* to *summative accreditation* as seen in the steps that are necessary to identify learning-outcome equivalencies, such as increasing our understanding of portfolio methods; quality assurance guidelines; guidance and counselling knowledge; and learning-outcome descriptions. In France, a clear and easy-to-follow process of assessment and accreditation has been developed. Norway recommends the use of clearly defined and described steps and stages that can be recognised by all stakeholders, as this is important for building confidence in the system.

While there is a clear distinction between formative and summative assessment, countries must be aware of the linkages and be clear about how assessment in recognition is to be employed for their specific educational and broader policy goals. Acknowledging and making explicit key outcomes of formative assessment is important to its success (Whittaker, 2011).

### **3. Action Area Three: Making RVA integral to education and training systems**

In the UNESCO Guidelines, it is suggested that Member States:

*‘...develop a mechanism for the formal education and training system that pays more attention to the quality of learning outcomes; create awareness and acceptance in*

*formal education and training systems of the learning outcomes gained in non-traditional settings; use RVA to build bridges between the different education and training sectors and to promote the integration of the outcomes of formal, non-formal and informal learning; and develop approaches to increase interaction between educational institutions, enterprises and voluntary organisations to translate learning outcomes from working and life experiences into credits and/or qualifications’ (UIL, 2012, p. 5).*

RVA is gradually becoming an accepted feature of educational reforms in the developed world. Stimulated not least of all by the efforts of the EU in this area, many European countries recognise the importance of qualifications in the economy and society at large. RVA is regarded as a policy tool that, in combination with other measures, targets more broadly the education and training system. In Austria, RVA is part of a recently published lifelong learning strategy designed with the objective of enhancing transparency throughout the education system. A key factor influencing RVA implementation in Austria is the structural integration of the business sector with education and training systems. In France, reforms in the system of recognition known as the *Validation des acquis de l’expérience (VAE)* have contributed to debate on a professional hierarchy which is based to a large degree on degrees and diplomas. By taking into account acquired experience, VAE is believed to open up possibilities to limit the negative social and economic impacts of dropping out of school, or otherwise ‘failing’ within the formal education sector. Furthering linkages between educational institutions and workplaces will the participation of workers currently not connected to training institutions.

Reforms in US higher education in terms of curricular structures – flexibility, modularization or elective options of American institutions – have facilitated the development of RVA (Michelson, 2012). In South Africa, RVA is closely tied to post-apartheid education and training reforms (SAQA, 2012a, pp.1–9). One of the specific objectives of RVA is to increase craft and related trades, and take black African employees beyond their current elementary occupations to more advanced levels (Samuels, 2013). There is also much sustained scholarship to make RVA an effective pedagogical device to create bridges between work-related and academic knowledge (Michelson, 2012).

Creating a diversified education and training system that captures the full significance of alternative learning pathways is regarded as an important contribution of RVA in Mauritius, Botswana, the Seychelles, and Namibia (Steenekamp and Singh, 2012). Several cultural barriers have been highlighted in the country case studies. The perception that learning outcomes attained through the conventional system are superior to those attained through open and distance learning settings, workplace experience and general life experience remains a key challenge (Murangi, 2013). Some of the challenges relate to curriculum development integrating non-formal and informal learning. Others, as in the case of France, relate to creating closer links between schools, companies and services. In Norway, a major limitation is that many education and

training providers in the continuing education and training sector have not yet strongly prioritised RVA.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training systems face the challenge of accommodating a broader range of vocationally relevant adult learning, merging general with vocational education, and formal with non-formal and informal learning modalities. Jarvis (2008) and Usher (2008) draw attention to the importance of countries also considering socio-cultural goals going beyond economic considerations and the skills needs of the adult population.

Research in Australia (Pitman, 2009) has shown that there is a belief that the link between RVA, the learning outcomes approach and competence-based education and training promotes a reduced understanding of knowledge. In the UK, perceptions of APEL as a threat to academic standards and knowledge development by and through the academy resulted in a trend towards its application in largely WBL contexts rather than for admission to undergraduate programmes located in the 'new university' sector (Pokorny, 2011).

In France, the RVA movement is seeking to counter perceptions that theoretical knowledge will be compromised through RVA by ensuring its implementation across all levels of education and training. France is undertaking broad education and training reforms to make education and training more relevant to the world of work and responsive to the expectations of the ever-growing number of candidates with incomplete diplomas requiring supplementary training. Increasing flexibility in these systems will require the introduction of greater numbers of educational modules that can be assessed on the basis of competence domains relevant to jobseekers and labour markets (Paulet, 2013).

In Canada, RVA practice has been more warmly accepted among faculty staff who are familiar with adult education and experiential learning and who have drawn on the works of Dewey (1925), Knowles (1970, 1975), Schön (1983, 1987) and Kolb (1984), which in turn have influenced the importance of RVA in the development of independent and reflective learners. Van Kleef (2011), using evidence from research in universities in Canada, argues for the strengthening of education and training structures (curricula, teaching practices) that subscribe to more participative and learner-centred learning, rich learning events and construction of meaning by learners.

In developing countries resistance to RVA has been due mainly to the relative lack of academic literacy and formal theory among workplace practitioners. A combination of academic and "everyday" knowledge could help in overcoming the resistance to RVA. Ghana is currently working on the introduction of the demand-oriented competence-based TVET curricula, which should further align the education on offer with the needs of its agro-based industrial economy (Baffour-Awuah, 2013).

Resistance to the implementation of RVA for admission purposes in higher education has implications for the domain of vocational education and its status in society. In many developing countries, vocational education and training is widely viewed as a second-tier subsystem located beneath the academic stream. If solutions are to be found to the skills

crises afflicting many developing countries, it is imperative that the status of vocational and occupationally-based qualifications be raised. In this respect, many countries are working to create national qualifications frameworks in order to enhance synergies between the academic, TVET and economic sectors.

Germany acknowledges that informal learning has the potential to strengthen the status of vocationally relevant qualifications. Strengthening informal learning of part-time and casual labour is therefore one of the foci of RVA strategies in Germany (Münchhausen, 2011). Germany also recommends the development of appropriate teaching methods that would at the same time create systematic links between different forms of learning.

#### **4. Action Area Four: Creating a coordinated national structure involving all stakeholders**

In this context it is suggested that Member States:

*'...ensure all stakeholders have clearly-defined roles and responsibilities in developing a coherent and coordinated national structure to oversee the design, implementation and quality assurance of the RVA system; establish mechanisms to adopt credible and quality RVA procedures, standards and instruments, as well as awarding qualifications; facilitate RVA implementation by putting in place effective administrative processes for receiving applications, organising assessment and providing feedback on outcomes, recording results, awarding qualifications and designing appeal processes; and make efforts to build the RVA infrastructure at local level so that it is available where people live, work and learn, and make RVA a part of existing institutions in communities'* (UIL, 2012, p. 5-6).

As many countries become knowledge-based economies there is bound to be a rapid growth in the lifelong learning market as providers respond to the challenge of meeting market needs and contribute to significant human capital development. In turn, government needs to play a regulatory role as the market expands. Government's regulatory role comes in three forms. First, establishing continuing education as the fourth pillar of lifelong education, after primary, secondary and higher education. Second, legislating to empower non-formal providers to provide RVA embedded in personalised training and learning, which includes both formative and summative assessment of prior learning as well as effective teaching and learning, and curriculum entitlement and choice. A third form of government regulation is accreditation through national qualifications frameworks or competency frameworks. In this way, private, public and voluntary institutions can remain competitive and also satisfy demands of niche markets such as nursing, business and management and medical services, which do not form part of the conventional university continuing education departments. Providers need to seek validation of programmes by registering on the Qualifications Register. Providers need to acknowledge regulatory frameworks as gatekeepers for compliance as well as for enhancing personalised training through recognition, validation and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning.

The contribution of RVA to educational, economic, social and individual development are inextricably intertwined and the real challenge in practice is for RVA is to align with the needs of different sectors and stakeholders – particularly the labour market and social sectors.

Close collaboration between governmental organisations such as the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Health and Welfare, as well as linking RVA to the competency-based qualifications to educational qualifications will improve the reliability of RVA measures and make them convenient for both learners and the companies and educators involved (Republic of Korea).

The low profile of occupational standards in educational provision still needs improvement. Many occupational standards remain unused because they are not linked to educational qualifications. In the US the strengthening of the link between academic and vocational education is seen in the establishment of middle institutional paths (further education and training, community colleges or post-secondary institutions) that promote both cognitive and applied learning, and require input requirements in the form of work experience and its recognition.

Forging effective partnerships between government, learning institutions, employers, individuals and non-formal training providers is the single most important factor of success of RVA in workforce development. These partnerships are vital when RVA is linked to employability and skills development, and entail a broadening of the recruitment base for both education and employment. The promotion of effective collaboration among employers, learning providers, awarding bodies and others is also the focus of Scotland's lifelong skills strategy (Scottish Government, 2007a). Cooperation between industry training bodies, registered training organisations, government learning institutions is promoting RVA constructively in New Zealand (Keller, 2013). Creating consensus among relevant and visible leaders, comprising employers, workers, educators and government officials, is a critical factor in the implementation of RVA for the purposes of workforce development in Mexico (García-Bullé, 2013).

Furthering linkages between civil society organisations and further education and training institutions has been highlighted by Jarvis (2008). Civil society organisations could develop socio-cultural purposes, quality systems, and guidelines that explicitly incorporate values which serve the wider community and society, including sustainability, inclusiveness, biculturalism and multiculturalism for example. These goals, they argue, could be reflected in the number of initiatives to improve the quality of the providers of educational, cultural and sports services for strengthening capacities, improving the quality of individuals' lives, and improving mental and physical well-being (Jarvis, 2008; Usher, 2008). Proper systems of assessment and validation capable of evaluating the socio-cultural goals of non-formal learning are also needed.

#### *Communicating opportunities presented by RVA to stakeholders*

Researchers claim that the concept and the opportunities RVA presents are still not well known among potential users and prioritised group, including citizens, businesses and

their employees, education and training providers, voluntary associations and social partner organisations in the labour market (Andersen and Aagaard, 2013). Sometimes training providers are *unable to classify knowledge* acquired through formal, non-formal and informal learning adequately. Rather, they should be able to tailor courses on offer and teaching methods to reflect previous learning. Appropriate teaching methods should be developed to promote the intended informal learning so as to create at the same time a systematic link between different forms of learning. The need to ensure that recognised learning is fully taken into account by providers rather than repeated by developing tailor-made courses has been highlighted by Norway. Building on experiences in practice in New Zealand and Australia, Bangladesh plans to include RVA as an additional tool that can be integrated into training agendas; and to provide registered training providers with the support, assistance and training to undertake RPL at their level. In New Zealand and Australia, registered training organisations that fall under the quality assurance framework of their national qualifications frameworks are also those that undertake RVA. Discussions with industry on how individuals could profit from validation continue although many hold the traditional attitude that formal education is the best form of learning. Mauritius is focusing on a communication strategy to expose major stakeholders to international RVA best practice. South Africa will put in place a national co-ordinated strategy with the appropriate resources (Samuels (with input from the SAQA Research Directorate), 2013). This will be important to implement RVA on a massive scale.

A key challenge in developing countries is the need for advocacy to raise awareness and sensitise governments to the need to give due recognition to education programmes being implemented by NGOs and community organisations with a proven track record in conducting non-formal learning. National agencies and specialist organisations, such as Vox in Norway, play a significant role in gathering and disseminating information on the benefits of RVA.

Making available research results to faculty staff in higher education on high-quality learning as well as co-curricular experiences can be a good way to sensitise faculty members to the significance of non-formal and informal learning. For Canada, Wong (2011) refers to one such report (NSSE, 2003) that has studied graduate attributes in terms of their participation in enriching educational experiences such as co-curricular activities, internships, field experiences, co-operative experiences, clinical assignments, community service or volunteer work, foreign language courses, work or study abroad, and culminating senior experiences such as senior projects or theses. The development of materials to promote RVA to stakeholders and learners, including sector-specific “business cases” for RVA, has been debated and implemented in Scotland with the purpose of inspiring more confidence about RVA among university staff, thereby countering perceptions that RVA processes are not sufficiently robust as indicators of student achievement and likely future performance (Whittaker, 2011).

## **5. Action Area Five. Building the capacities of RVA personnel**

In this context the UNESCO Guidelines suggests that Member States:

*'...ensure appropriate qualifications, skills and competences of RVA personnel, allowing them to manage and conduct the assessment and validation processes in their specific socio-economic contexts; and establish a system for the training of RVA personnel, and facilitate networks for mutual learning at local and national levels, and across countries, to enhance their competences and to develop best practice'* (UIL, 2012, p. 6).

The quality of RVA hinges significantly on the capability of RVA administrators, assessors, facilitators, counsellors and other practitioners to set up and maintain inclusive RVA practices. RVA assessment is based on evidence and must be equitable, culturally inclusive, fair, flexible, valid and reliable, and provide for reasonable adjustment. This requires not only competent assessors and validation procedures to ensure the authority and reliability of the results, but also requires that the performance of assessors be monitored to ensure consistency in their judgements. In Australia, there is increasing action research on developing assessors' capacities, aimed at helping assessors to see their own strengths as advanced practitioners. In Portugal, professionalisation is sought through the sharing of practices, knowledge and experiences among teachers and trainers who carry out adult learning programmes and undertake validation assessments. Many countries (e.g. Australia, South Africa and New Zealand) have in place facilities for the registration of assessors. At the School of New Learning (DePaul University Chicago), the responsibility for advising, coaching the development of evidence and assessing/evaluating falls primarily to "faculty mentors" and professional experts, who serve as community-based "experts" to student programmes, helping individuals to shape a "focus area" of study and its integration within the larger degree design and requirements. The college has adopted four qualities for feedback and assessment: clarity, integrity (with regard to criteria) flexibility and empathy (Fiddler, 2012).

Professionalisation is, of course, not the only issue of import in this context. A recent international review (Carrigan and Downes, 2010) raises concerns that assessment may alienate and frighten potential learners from marginalised backgrounds who have had negative assessment experiences in the past. This also applies to developing countries, which face major challenges when it comes to ensuring quality in the assessment of learning outcomes.

In most cases the assessment process used for RVA provides abundant additional support for applicants. The provision of information to key players is important. In several countries, professional guides and counsellors are identified, as well as trainers, to promote RVA and support candidates. In France, RVA guidance and counselling was increased, which led to the birth of a new profession, that of the APEL advisor. Mauritius, which will use Creole to facilitate RVA processes, emphasises that information should take into account the complexities of the language that often impede fair validation. In

Australia a guidance document has been developed to help guidance counsellors assess the applicant's skills.

Assessors need training on effective assessment procedures, and this is the case whether an assessor is a supervisor in a workplace or a member of college faculty.

Many countries have shown that due attention should be paid during implementation *processes* to the provision of individual support to identify and document skills. The implementation of RVA should not be a cumbersome process and sufficient time should be allowed. The process of matching skills with competences described in training documentation can be off-putting for those who have had limited interaction with formal education. In Crooks, Kane, and Cohen's (1996) model, the administration link deals with the administration of assessment tasks, as task performance can be greatly influenced by the procedures followed in presenting and administering tasks. The challenges for learners resulting from this are easily underestimated. One way of ensuring confidence and fairness in the assessment could be to standardise the RVA process, from administration to feedback about the outcome. It is important that all claimants are offered the same treatment and, for example, receive guidance on the process and instruments involved. Assessment can be made more transparent by making criteria better known to the claimants.

The need to train RPL facilitators and assessors in all sectors prior to extending the same has been highlighted. The identification of facilitators and assessors presents a challenge in itself and these positions are frequently filled on a part-time basis in all sectors (Allgoo, 2013). The Philippines has reported that educators, instructional managers and facilitators lack the capacity to assess outcomes from non-formal learning, despite their ability to develop learning strategies using different methodologies and technologies.

## **6. Action Area Six: Designing sustainable funding mechanisms**

In this context it is suggested that Member States:

*'...provide sufficient financial resources to build the basic infrastructure of the RVA system. develop sustainable cost-sharing mechanisms involving multi-stakeholder partnerships i.e. public, private, community, as well as individual learners. Public funds and private contributions to education institutions, as well as training levies from enterprises, should also be used to fund the implementation of RVA; make special provision for access to RVA arrangements at a reduced rate or free of charge for vulnerable groups and individuals; and conduct cost-benefit analyses to develop evidence on the benefits of RVA for individuals, enterprises, education institutions and for society as a whole' (UIL, 2012, p. 6).*

An important challenge reported by many countries concerns the costs for the individual and the system of information and guidance, assessors, facilitators, auditors and awarding bodies. RVA is not a cheap procedure and a considerable number of staff is necessary for the elaboration of professional references, making up-scaling a challenging undertaking. For Mexico a major challenge is to put in place cost-sharing (state-

supported and self-financing) mechanisms for the RVA of labour competences. Such a mechanism has been put in place in France, namely the Joint Fund for Career Security (*Fonds paritaire de sécurisation des parcours professionnels*). This is a combined form of financing by social partners and the state, which is expected to provide continuing training to a further 200,000 jobseekers and over 500,000 low-skilled employees per year.

In Mauritius, funding of RVA has been a major issue. The pilot projects were funded by the National Empowerment Foundation and, taking into consideration the low income of prospective RVA candidates, the fees were subsidised (Samuels, 2013). Namibia will soon introduce a national training levy that aims to motivate employers to fund, either directly or indirectly, training and development of their employees.

Canada does not have an RVA policy or a lifelong learning policy, and funding for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is a matter for provincial governments. Recent research has recommended the creation of expanded financial supports through the tax system, the Employment Insurance (EI) system and other mechanisms to reduce cost barriers for adult learners and to provide stronger incentives to employers to invest in education and training for their employees. This is to be flanked by expanded public policy recognition of, and improved funding stability for, the voluntary non-profit sector as a critically important source of productive employment and learning and skills development for large numbers of Canadian adults (Canadian Council of Learning, 2008). Austria recommends ensuring financial support for institutions and/or individuals. The Republic of Korea has also reported the need for financial support and attention to this issue at a national level.

In Denmark, recognition of non-formal and informal learning is supported by the Ministry of Education (Denmark. Institute for Evaluation (EVA), 2010). Funding is delivered through a system called the “taximeter system”, which links one-off funding to institutions according to the number of RVA candidates completing competence assessments, personal study plans, training plans within specific institutions and courses of adult education and training. The amount paid to an institution varies according to the type of study programme in which a person is enrolled. Every year the taximeter rates are set in the spending bill adopted by Parliament, based on estimated costs per student completion in each of several streams. Allowance schemes for forgone earnings during participation in education and training are based on a co-financed system through public and private sources. Private sources include funding by companies through a national fund set up by the social partners and through collective agreements. Co-financing is more or less a universal rule.

In England, there is a shift in priority in APEL in light of the dramatic changes English higher education is undergoing in funding, which from 2012 will see HEFCE funding withdrawn from postgraduate study, and all undergraduate subjects with the exception of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Universities will be able to increase their fees and undergraduate students will be expected to pay these increased course fees through a state-funded deferred payment loan, which for the first time will be available to part-time as well as full-time students. Within this context, and by

enabling experienced students to study at an accelerated rate, APEL could provide a means for universities to attract and retain experienced students, many of whom may be unemployed due to the global economic downturn.

Countries recommend that RVA costs should be kept to a minimum as recognition benefits not only the individual but also society in general. Recognition needs to be seen as an investment and a right that requires accessible recognition arrangements.

## **Recommendations based on the core principles in the UNESCO Guidelines**

Although remarkable achievements have been seen in establishing comprehensive continuing education in UNESCO member states, in broad terms it still cannot fulfil the urgent needs of the countries' goal of economic development and social progress, and those of the massive number of learners. There are many problems to be tackled in the countries and internationally. The core principles in the UNESCO Guidelines are addressing several of these issues.

### ***I. Ensure equity and inclusiveness in access to learning opportunities***

The first of the principles highlighted in the UNESCO Guidelines is:

*'Ensuring equity and inclusiveness in access to learning opportunities. Every individual should have the right to access and engage in any form of learning suited to his/her needs, and have their learning outcomes made visible and valued (UIL, 2012, p.4).*

*RVA is first and foremost about making diverse forms of learning opportunities accessible to all.* These diverse forms of learning increasingly cover a broad range of compensatory and enriching programmes: First, there are those programmes that provide academic qualifications and credits through the development of degree courses and credits helping millions to improve their knowledge. Computers and the internet make it more convenient to access flexible forms of degree education. Second, there are continuing education and training programmes that provide vocational training for helping workers to attain vocational certificates. Vocational training of workers, especially low-skilled as well as technical personnel, is important to improve the knowledge and technical level. Third, there are community education and learning organisations that contribute to inspiring the learners' learning continuously and collectively.

There is generally a neglect of informal learning or non-institutionalised learning such as working in community activities or learning by working. This includes learning experientially and through communication media. Continuing education should not only be compensatory, giving a second chance to youth and adults who have missed out on initial learning opportunities. There is also continuing learning and continuous vocational education and training throughout life for people who enjoy learning for their private benefit and personal development.

Both lifelong education and lifelong learning need to be emphasised. Lifelong education implies a greater emphasis on learning within formal educational institutions than does lifelong learning, which potentially encompasses all forms of learning. Lifelong learning pays considerable emphasis to strengthening the foundation for effective learning through the life span. In practice this entails developing the skills, knowledge and motivation among young people and adults to enable them to be self-directed learners. The use of RVA to promote equality of access and participation in education is often driven by wider policy frameworks or contexts. However, drawing on Amartya Sen's work (2000) a distinction needs to be made between RVA that is related to social-justice policies and RVA related to indirect policies dealing with increasing equality in educational opportunity. Depending on the particular contexts and circumstances, both policy types have benefits. While in some countries RVA is a tool to increase the number of persons with higher education, in other countries RVA efforts are more targeted and are designed either to entrench the gains made by increased literacy levels (Botswana, South Africa) or to close the gap between different sections of the community, particularly immigrant groups (Norway), indigenous populations (New Zealand), rural groups, low-qualified workers (Mauritius) 'young leavers at risk' (Scotland) and those trapped in the poverty cycle. In the latter approach, recognition is an important tool for the promotion of inclusion.

Research evidence shows low-uptake of RVA among equity groups such as women. This finding is related to the lack of familiarity with formal learning discourses. Instead, equity groups are more likely to participate in training than to seek recognition of existing skills. RVA benefits individuals by improving career and employment prospects and creating pathways to further learning and qualification opportunities. Beyond the bounds of these external dimensions of personal development, RVA contributes to self-esteem, confidence and motivation, greater awareness, improving personal reflection, increased confidence and self-directed learning management.

## ***II. Promote equal value of learning outcomes from formal, non-formal and informal learning***

In the Guidelines the emphasis is on:

*'...promoting the equal value of learning outcomes from formal, non-formal and informal learning. Competences that every individual has accumulated through non-formal and informal learning should be treated on a par with those that are obtained through formal learning.'* (UIL, 2012, p 4)

Colley et al. (2003) in their seminal effort of comparative integration of formal, non-formal and informal learning noted that: "Learning is often thought of as 'formal', 'informal' and 'non-formal'. [To think they are discrete categories] ...is to misunderstand the nature of learning. It is more accurate to conceive 'formality' and 'informality' as attributes present in all circumstances of learning" (2003 *ibid.*). However, Harris (2006) and Michelson (2006) argue that caution must be exercised in suggesting that all skills, knowledge and competences acquired in different settings are the same or equivalent, as this devalues both formal learning and non-formal and informal learning; there is

mounting evidence that they are not the same. Rather, it is more accurate to say that given a certain definition of a set of skills, knowledge and competences, the type of setting where they are acquired does not matter.

UNESCO uses the term 'equal' to mean the importance of relating non-formal to the formal learning without non-formal being necessarily reduced to the formal. For example, RVA does not necessarily mean that all participants should be obtaining a specific certificate or diploma for each non-formal activity. Nevertheless in order that non-formal learning should be accountable, non-formal education should find ways to improve its quality. Extending RVA processes to non-formal and informal learning can be an important way for exerting pressure on non-formal learning to raise its quality.

### **III. Ensure the centrality of the individuals in the RVA process**

According to the UNESCO Guidelines:

*'...the process should respect and reflect individuals' needs and their participation should be on a voluntary basis.'*

RVA should be used to show how best an individual's existing competences can be deployed and strengthened and which learning environment and form of learning is best suited to a particular individual. For this reason, other learning environments and forms of learning must be utilised more effectively. These could include combinations of on-the-job training, mentoring, tutoring, bridging programmes, independent learning, and distance learning.

Taking into account both external and internal dimensions of personal development are important. External dimensions refer to: the opportunity RVA presents to gain a qualification either for its own sake or for work requirements; not having to repeat skills and knowledge training; reducing individuals' study time or fast-tracking qualifications (Miller, 2009); and gaining assistance with career planning (Cameron, 2009). The recognition of competences in the labour market is a major driver for the *individual*. Internal dimensions such as self-esteem, confidence and motivation, greater self-awareness, improving personal reflection, increased confidence and self-directed learning management should not be neglected. In a recent exploratory study, Armsby (2013) for example, argues that RPL could be promoted through an ontological focus in higher education, where RPL affects ways of being rather than or as well as ways of knowing.

In Scotland the value of the RVA process in terms of increasing learners' confidence and motivation to undertake further learning and development was confirmed through project evaluation. RVA promoted a positive view of learning, based on an enhancement rather than a deficit model. The peer-group approach to developing learner self-awareness of skills prior to embarking on a formal programme, and to the development of reflective skills and writing skills, was seen as streamlining and accelerating the process of completing a qualification. As a result of formative RVA, learners embarked on

a formal qualification pathway with greater self-confidence and greater understanding of how they learn, and how to express and demonstrate their learning (Whittaker, 2011). In the North, RVA systems in highly developed countries often place a significant emphasis on individuals' motivations to acquire certification and the manner in which information on acquiring certification is accessed. In the Netherlands, for instance, it is usually framed in terms of the lifelong learning of the 'enterprising individual who is working to develop himself or herself continuously' (Duvekot et al., 2003, p.3). Individual responsibility is incorporated into recognition processes.

The context in the South can differ markedly. The barriers there are not only dispositional, but primarily situational and structural (UIL, 2009). Where populations are engaging effectively with non-formal learning, for example, it is collective activities such as systemic recognition (e.g. through effective and transparent equivalence or actively embedding the existing programme into an NQF) and policy coordination that are foremost in RVA reform efforts.

Thus while developed countries emphasise the exercise of individual choice and preference as central motivations, this perspective is yet to be explored in developing countries – a state of affairs which is due in part to the high levels of functional illiteracy, and the need to continue to focus on access to basic education.

#### ***IV. Improve flexibility and openness of formal education and training***

Under this principle, the UNESCO Guidelines emphasise further that:

*'...education and training consider diverse forms of learning, taking into account learners' needs and experiences'.*

Enhancing personalised learning depends on: development of both formative and summative assessment for formal and informal learning; effective teaching and learning pedagogies and curricular entitlement and choice; organising the institution for personalised learning and; beyond formal learning. Personalised education denotes new pedagogies of aiming at cultivating a more rational, reflexive, self-governing individual. The learner is at the centre of all learning.

There are several challenges in enhancing RVA through personalised learning including formative and summative assessments. Continuing programmes need to be validated. In particular, continuing education institutions need to demonstrate the capability in the assessment for learning. Institutions should be expected to demonstrate in documents and panel discussions how young people and adults achieve the intended learning outcomes. Intended learning outcomes in competency/qualifications frameworks need to match the course intended learning outcomes.

As regards effective teaching and learning pedagogy, pedagogical innovations can include: universities offering programmes that are open to the community outside the university in community learning centres; the other is "blended-learning" which combines the benefits of face to face and e-learning. A third is providing ladders of opportunities for learners to progress from relatively low levels of attainment to progressively higher levels. Providers should offer courses which allow those who have not completed secondary schooling to access opportunity to study to attain higher level

learning outcomes through to post-secondary levels, degree and post graduate education.

As regards flexible curriculum design, labour competency frameworks and national qualifications frameworks provide generic level descriptors which can be used for certificate, diploma and degree courses, as well as for non-accredited courses. However, curriculum design should not be too generic. It should be noted that the generic level descriptors are only minimum standards. In order to make a qualification a genuine currency and enhance its portability it is necessary to ensure that qualifications levels are equivalent to the curriculum practised in the educational system, but with industry involvement at all levels.

Governments should create a fund for continuing education to enable access to higher education for disadvantaged groups. This financing should be sustainable rather than project-based.

The teachers of adults must become counsellors. Diverse forms of counselling and competence training will have a central function to enable individuals to take personal responsibility for planning and continuing their competence development.

Advocacy-for RVA embedded in personalised training is essential to bring RVA into public agendas.

#### **V. Promote quality assurance in the entire RVA process**

According to the UNESCO Guidelines:

*‘...it is imperative that criteria and procedures for assessing and validating non-formal and informal learning are relevant, reliable, fair and transparent.’*

Governments need to understand that the shift to an outcomes-based approach has many implications for the quality of assessment, validation and certification and learning and teaching strategies (Arthur 2009). Traditionally, assessment has been based on requirements of, and expected performance in formal education and training. This process however, is not suitable in a lifelong learning system that recognises a diversification of learning paths. There should be no difference between the recognition of outcomes from non-formal and informal learning (RPL) and assessment against designated learning outcomes or standards, which make up the qualifications.

Workplace learning assessment should include assessment of formal, non-formal and informal learning. This means that informal and non-formal workplace learning needs to meet some quality assurance requirement such as accreditation in order to be recognised through any credit transfer arrangement.

Quality assurance of policies, procedures and processes is vital for gaining trust among users. Generally, countries promote the view that core principles within which RVA provision will operate should provide a more transparent and equitable process, and facilitate mutual trust and confidence among receiving institutions.

There is already a trend in the US for some institutions to design degree programmes around student learning outcomes, or competences, rather than college credits.

Evaluative frameworks are being developed in increasing numbers for competency-based prior learning assessment programmes in order to equate their effectiveness to other programme evaluation processes within institutions of higher education. In Canada measures for the assessment of educational quality (e.g., CAEL standards for PLA) are applied to the assessment of prior learning in competency-based education and assessment, for example in the area of professional registration. However, there has been some scepticism expressed regarding their applicability, given their very different conditions and purposes.

NQFs need to be supportive of educational reforms with implications for the management and delivery of education and training, design of programmes and assessment and certification processes.

#### **VI. Strengthen partnerships among all stakeholders**

In this context it has been suggested that member states:

*'...emphasise a shared responsibility from design through to implementation and evaluation of the RVA system.*

Information gathered from numerous countries on their policies and practices indicate that partnerships with various stakeholders differ significantly. Three models of implementation and coordination emerge from these countries (Singh, 2014): Systems of shared responsibility; shared systems dominated by industry-based processes, and systems driven by stakeholders from the adult learning sector. Lifelong learning is becoming ever more essential in today's world and the involvement of different stakeholders is now an important part of the educational scene.

NQFs do not themselves promote RVA (Dyson and Keating, 2005). Instead, this occurs through the actions of stakeholders at the workplace, individual and provider levels. For linkages between recognition practices and NQFs to be successful, they need to take into account the real world of learning and working at several levels by: (1) developing individual competence portfolios for different informal and non-formal activities; (2) linking individual learning needs and competence requirements in the workplace, the local community and region to tailor-made education and training (non-formal) offers; and (3) incorporating work-related and adult learning activities either as integral parts of accredited programmes or as part of non-accredited programmes. In the context of knowledge-based societies, Livingstone and Guile (2012) have shown, such informal and non-formal activities can develop knowledge, skills and competence in highly effective ways, and need to become an explicit feature of supporting further education, transition to work, and the social integration of individuals in society – the important pillars of education for sustainable development.

This close collaboration between workplace, community, individual and provider levels is essential for preventing the narrowing of the richness of individual experience and the inclusive, open-ended and lifelong character of learning processes. Countries need to be careful to ensure that outcome orientations in qualifications are not reduced to narrow task-related skills and knowledge, and instead include broad descriptors of knowledge, skills and competences (moral, civic and social), learning objectives, standards and

quality of input (Bohlinger, 2007–08) with the aim of promoting an all-rounded individual.

There is a need to give more attention to the demand side of the equation. Countries need to ask how companies, organisations and individuals can be encouraged to access RVA opportunities as a means of advancing their learning of target groups such as people who are less educated and employees in low-skilled positions who are less likely to be able to engage with formal education systems.

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# A UK Perspective on Validated Prior Learning

# 7

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## Validated Prior Learning as an Instrument for Access to Higher Education by Two Marginalised Groups

Jane Murray

### Introduction

The focus for this chapter<sup>8</sup> is Validated Prior Learning (VPL) as an instrument for access to Higher Education (HE) in the United Kingdom (UK) by two marginalised groups. The United Kingdom comprises four countries: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland but the chapter is located within two of the four countries of the United Kingdom: England and Wales. The decision to select the two countries was made because whilst each of the four countries of the UK has its own education system, England and Wales share documentation and similarities which are not shared by Scotland and Northern Ireland, for example, funding is significantly different in England and Wales from funding in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The first marginalised group in focus comprises people who have a special need or disability or a special need and a disability. Truszczyński (2012) distinguishes between 'special educational needs' as a term used for children in school and 'disability' as a term for adults once they have left school. Nevertheless, since many students in HE are newly emerged from school and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are educational organisations, the term 'special educational needs' and 'disability' are used interchangeably in this document. The second marginalised group in focus comprises HE students in the 50-plus age category. In the UK and Europe, the population is ageing (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2012a). Currently, over 22 million people in the UK are aged 50 years and over, representing over a third of the UK population (Age UK, 2014a). Equally, one out of every six people in the UK is older than 65 but by 2050 one in-four will be older than 65 (UK Parliament, 2010). The role of Validated Prior Learning (VPL) processes in supporting access of these two marginalised groups to HE and the extent and nature of the uses of these processes are discussed at macro-, meso- and micro-levels, with reference to specific case studies. Two major VPL focus points were

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identified in the UK data: (a) prior learning or experience reducing or eliminating entry requirements and (b) allowances during the course ease progress through degree.

The chapter opens with a consideration of the European and UK contexts. Discussion then turns to characteristics of the two selected groups before moving to focus on VPL processes at macro-, meso- and micro-levels in the UK. The conclusion draws together the UK findings in regard to the two selected groups to posit that a varied picture of VPL supporting Access to HE in the UK exists, influenced by an asymmetric power relationship between HEIs and individual citizens, with HEIs the hegemonic partner.

## **Europe**

The United Kingdom has been a European Union member since 1973 and as such must comply with EU legislation and policy specific to qualifications and employment. The European context is characterised as a co-operative, knowledge-based economy where citizens have mobility and the ability to 'acquire the skills, knowledge and competences required of them' (Europa, 2013). In this regard, comparability of qualifications and transparency across member states are considered crucial (Brockmann, Clarke and Winch, 2011). Professional and academic qualifications and vocational education and training (VET) are each regarded as highly important for the European economy (European Parliament, 2005; CEDEFOP, 2011). Nevertheless, significant barriers to achieving the EU Commission's characterisation seem to prevail, with a quarter of adults within the EU identified as lacking basic skills to be successful in a modern knowledge economy (European Commission and OECD, 2013).

In 2000, the Lisbon European Council acknowledged the potential value of high quality VET to promoting of employability, competitiveness, social cohesion, mobility and social inclusion (Europa, 2011). The Copenhagen Process and Declaration (2002) (Europa, 2011) were drivers towards enhanced European cooperation in VET. They consisted of a political element, the development of instruments across Europe to increase quality and transparency of qualifications and competences as well as mobility, co-operative learning at European level and involvement of all relevant stakeholders at national level with a view to enhancing VET quality assurance. Work flowing from the Copenhagen Process continues in through contributions to the Education and Training 2020 framework within the Europe 2020 strategy (The Council of the European Union, 2009). The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) and the European Training Foundation (ETF) are the main bodies involved in supporting cooperation in VET.

Alongside the Copenhagen Process and Declaration runs Directive 2005/36/EC which models recognition of professional qualifications across Europe (European Parliament, 2005). This document focuses on greater mobility for professional workers through more straightforward administrative procedures, greater flexibility of labour markets, enhanced freedom in provision of services and more automatic recognition of professional qualifications (Europa, 2010). Nevertheless, there remain significant barriers

to the free marketing of professional services across EU member states (Kerneys and Prentice, 2011).

Together with attempts to align VET and professional qualifications across Europe, the European Parliament (2006) has identified Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, which it sees as both preparation for adult life and updating of skills throughout the life course. Competences included are communication, mathematics, science and technology, learning to learn, social and civic areas, initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and expression. The acquisition of key competences aligns with the EU principles of equality and access for all. Nevertheless, key barriers have been identified to the universal achievement of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2012). These include students' motivation for taking up STEM subjects and careers, low achievement in basic language, mathematics and scientific skills and poor 'transversal competences', such as entrepreneurship, ICT and civic and social competences (p.9). The Key Competences for Lifelong Learning framework applies universally so includes disadvantaged groups who may need support to realise their educational potential. These groups are identified by the European Parliament (2006) as '...people with low basic skills, early school leavers, the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, migrants'. This chapter focuses on two of these groups.

Bifurcation of VET and professional qualifications tends to be linked to status and has been identified as a particular barrier to positive outcomes and trajectories for socially disadvantaged students (Colley, Chadderton and Nixon, 2014). This suggests that more open access to HE for marginalised groups might be a factor in achieving the European Commission's ambition for a co-operative, knowledge-based economy where citizens have mobility and all have the ability to '...acquire the skills, knowledge and competences required of them' (Europa, 2013).

### **England and Wales in the UK**

According to the most recent statistics, the resident population of England and Wales is 56.1 million, with 9.2 million aged over 64 years (Office for National Statistics, 2012b); in 2013 there were 12 million graduates in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2013). The UK HE sector is currently regarded as among the best in the world (SMCPC, 2013b). Across England and Wales, there are 126 Universities, with 9 of these in Wales; within the scope of this study, a sample of eight Universities was selected in order to explore approaches to VPL. The eight universities were selected according to two criteria: their geographical location spread across England and Wales and provision of a good cross representation of universities across England and Wales, in reference to national league tables (The Guardian, 2011).

Within England and Wales, the VPL agenda fits within a 'widening access and participation' agenda and associated with that is the focus on retention and student experience (HEFCE, 2014; HEFCW, 2014a). In considering the effects of legislation on

VPL, it was necessary to consider the legislation which directly influences practices, for example, the European Charter on Life Long Learning (EUA, 2008) as well as that with indirect influence on practices. The latter is important in this context because access and the wider ‘student experience’ may impact on the extent to which the cultural climate of an institution encourages and promotes the use of VPL. Moreover, variations in the quality and nature of learning in terms of formality may have a bearing on adoption of VPL. The European Commission (EC) (2001) makes clear distinctions between formal, non-formal and informal learning, defining formal learning as ‘typically provided by education or training institutions, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and leading to certification...intentional from the learner’s perspective’ (p.32). Equally, the EC (2001) distinguishes non-formal learning as that not provided by an education or training institution; whilst non-formal learning does not typically lead to certification, it is structured according to learning support, learning objectives or learning time and importantly, the learner has an intention to engage in learning. On the other hand, the learner generally does not set out to learn when he or she engages in informal learning; informal learning occurs in the course of daily life, for example those occurring during leisure, family or work activities., family or leisure. It is not structured to fit learning time, learning support or learning objectives and it does not result in certification.

The effects of variable influences of legislation on differential learning formalities and vice versa can be displayed graphically in a model that allows for commentary regarding VPL (Table 1):

*Table 1: A Model for Commentary regarding Validated Prior Learning*

|                            | <b>Direct Influence of legislation</b> | <b>Indirect Influence of legislation</b> |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Formal learning</b>     |  |  |
| <b>Non-formal learning</b> |  |  |
| <b>Informal learning</b>   |  |  |

The rationale for considering indirect policy as an influence is that access and the broader ‘student experience’ all contribute to whether the cultural climate of an institution encourages and promotes the use of VPL (Prior, 2010).

Whilst the United Kingdom was one of the original countries that signed the Bologna Declaration in 1999, many UK universities have not fully aligned their practices to this process and in effect, the terms ‘Accreditation of Prior Learning’ (APL), ‘Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning’ (APEL) and ‘Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning’ (APCL) are more prevalent terms used than VPL; some institutions use ‘Recognition of

Prior Learning' (RPL) or 'Accredited Work Based Learning' (AWBL) (CEDEFOP, 2007; SEEC, 2013). Students who do not gain enough qualifications at school to enter through financial routes can also enter HE through Access to Higher Education courses (QAA, 2011a). Although this is not the focus of this study, it indicates that students have a choice to either explore a VPL route or attend an access course. In addition, it should be noted that national data in the UK does not categorize students according to specific ages, but does distinguish students (18-24 years) from mature students (25 plus). National admission trends data tends to focus on undergraduate or post-graduate and students or mature students (Universities UK, 2013). Information on special needs and disability is dependent on voluntary disclosure by the students themselves, raising ethical and other questions for the providers, students and advocates of VPL (Riddell, Edward, Weedon and Ahlgren, 2010).

### *England*

A major reform to HEIs in England began in June 2011 and the consultation concluded in June 2012 (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012). England is an unequal society: at one level this appears socio-economic, but this inequality affects access to other areas of society. As part of the UK, England is identified as relatively wealthy (International Monetary Fund, 2013; Legatum Institute, 2013; Bennion *et al.*, 2013), yet a rising trend in England's wealth has not been matched by equality of opportunity: poor social mobility is rife in England (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (SMCPC), 2013a). In England, for example, young people from socio-economically disadvantaged homes are less likely to become well-paid professionals than their more advantaged contemporaries (Jerrim, Vignoble and Ferrin, 2013). In regard to its weak congruence between wealth and social mobility, England is not aligned with other English speaking wealthy countries (Blanden 2013). Nevertheless, the role of education, including HE, has been identified as a key factor in social mobility for England (Education and Social Research Council, 2006; Stuart, 2012).

English government monitors fair access to higher education via the Office For Fair Access (OFFA). Nevertheless, the gap between HE participation rates of students from the most and least socio-economically disadvantaged homes diminished in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Most recently, government has extended student loans to part-time students and provided additional money to students (SMCPC, 2013a), yet fair access to HE in England remains problematic. Whilst HE has expanded five-fold over the past forty years, disproportionately few students are recruited to good universities from socio-economically disadvantaged homes (Millburn, 2012: 2). In short, children from wealthy families have gained most from HE's expansion (Blanden, Gregg and Machin, 2005; Goldthorpe, 2012). Moreover, England's most selective universities are weakest for recruiting their students from the full range of socio-economic classes: Oxbridge are 100 times more likely to admit nineteen-year-olds who have been privately educated than those who were eligible for free school meals in Year 11 (SMCPC, 2013a).

Current government ministers – themselves predominantly born into socio-economic privilege (Hope, 2013) - see a ‘full university experience’ as the preserve of an ‘elite’ drawn from two groups: the talented and the socio-economically advantaged (Scott, 2013). From that position, English government has recently introduced several policies, including capping student numbers, higher tuition fees, abolishing Aimhigher, replacing the Educational Maintenance Allowance available to eligible 16-to-18-year-olds with a discretionary allowance and impoverishing careers guidance in schools. These policies have presented difficulties to universities attempting to widen participation in higher education as a vehicle for social mobility and are identified as deterrents to potential students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds applying for graduate study (SMCPC, 2013a).

Yet concurrently – and apparently paradoxically – government has significantly strengthened OFFA’s role (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS), 2011). OFFA now monitors the work of HEIs more closely to ensure they ‘fulfil their outreach and retention obligations’ (p.7) and present ‘active and energetic challenge’ to HEIs (p.11). Additionally, HEIs must present ‘Access Agreements’ for annual review by OFFA.

### *Wales*

A narrower gap between the rich and the poor prevails in Wales than in the rest of the UK, yet significant inequalities do exist in Wales and many for the life course of individuals (Davies *et al.*, 2011). Social mobility is currently less of a focus in Wales than is the case in England (SMCPC, 2013a). Welsh government is highly committed to tackling poverty and its potential effect on education; one feature of its strategy that relates directly to HE is the provision of a grant to Welsh students for HE tuition fees of more than £3,500 per year – at least 59% or more of individual Welsh students’ tuition fees are paid by the state (SMCPC, 2013a; Kemplay, 2014). Welsh government devolves money to the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). HEFCW works with Welsh universities to ensure that funds it allocates to them are spent; these funds are based largely on student enrolments (HEFCW, 2014b).

In 2011-12 (most recent figures) 102,110 Welsh citizens were in HE out of a population of 3,063,456 (ONS, 2012) – a rising trend from 93,405 in 2001. In comparison with other areas of the UK, Welsh universities have had greater success in attracting participation from students from non-traditional backgrounds (Welsh Government, 2013). This may be the result of a rise in Welsh government funding for Welsh HEIs, averaging 13.8 per cent in 2013–14 (Welsh Government, 2013). Equally, the Welsh Government states clearly its commitment to HE for ‘all those with the potential to benefit from it’ (Welsh Government, 2013: 2). A characteristic of Welsh HE is that much is delivered in Welsh language (Wales, 2014).

## Two Marginalised Groups

Characteristics of the two marginalised groups in focus are discussed here. As outlined, the first comprises people who have a special need or disability or a special need *and* a disability and the second comprises HE students in the 50-plus age category.

Truszczyński (2012) indicates that several million EU citizens have a disability or special educational needs. He states that this is 'one of the largest groups of disadvantaged citizens in the EU' (p.1) and furthermore posits that it is common for citizens within this group to experience 'institutional segregation', or be denied opportunities for education or employment altogether. Nevertheless, countries across Europe classify the terms 'special educational needs', 'disability' and even 'inclusive education' differently, making international comparisons challenging (NESSE, 2012). Consistently across Europe, though, people with disabilities are far less likely to access HE than their peers (European Commission, 2010).

In the UK, a person is defined as disabled if he or she has '...a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on (his or her) ability to do normal daily activities' (Her Majesty's Government (HMG), 2010). In the UK, children with special educational needs are those who:

*'... have needs or disabilities that affect their ability to learn. For example:*

- behavioural/social (eg difficulty making friends)*
- reading and writing (eg dyslexia)*
- understanding things*
- concentrating (eg Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder)*
- physical needs or impairments'. (UK Government, 2013)*

About 18 per cent of the overall UK working population is disabled, although Wales has a comparatively high percentage of people with disabilities at around 21.7%. (Riddell et al., 2010); equally, 20% of children in UK schools have a special educational need, amounting to around 1.6 million children (UK Government, 2012). Since 2010, the English government has put in place 'capability' assessments to assess adult work fitness and many more people who had previously been assessed as disabled have had those assessments overturned. Nevertheless, the system for the assessments has been identified as highly flawed and discriminatory (Dugan, 2013; Royal College of Nursing, 2013). Contemporaneously, English government has sought to remove 'the bias towards inclusion' (Rose et al., 2011). Runswick-Cole (2011) challenges the assumption that such a bias exists and indeed, extant legislation is clear that while '...children who want (and whose parents want) a mainstream education, will be placed in a mainstream school', this is predicated on the caveat '...as long as this is thought to be compatible with the efficient education of others in that school' (Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, 2013). Although these moves have been proposed for the Children and Families Bill which covers England and Wales, the aspects addressing special educational needs (SEN) do not apply to Wales as they do to England. Recently in England, then, progress that

had been made towards inclusion has been in danger of erosion and that is in a context in which access for people with disabilities to HE is already more limited than their peers. In the UK, people with disabilities are half as likely as their peers without disabilities to have a degree: although around 28% of working age people without disabilities are graduates, the figure for people with disabilities who have a degree drops to 14.9% (Office for Disability, 2014), indicating a clear discrepancy.

According to SHARE (2013), whilst many experiences for European people aged 50+ depend on the countries they live in, across Europe this group is distinguished by particular characteristics. Many - though not all - are financially impoverished, leading to poor quality of life. Many suffer poor health yet many are themselves carers. Equally, many are working for more years than they had intended to do yet, suggests SHARE (2013) social policies and institutional structures can ensure fulfilled lives for people aged 50+.

In the UK there are currently over 21 million people aged 50-plus, constituting about one third of the population (Age UK, 2011). Equally, there is concern that social division will increasingly leave many older people with a poor standard of living (Age UK, 2014b), with older women particularly vulnerable as a high number of women aged 50-plus currently work in poorly paid part-time jobs in England (Trade Union Congress (TUC), 2014). One way of addressing the issue of poor living standards among the 50-plus population might be to upskill older workers by giving them access to HE which would enable them to contribute more actively to a dynamic knowledge economy and reap rewards from doing so. Yet in most UK HEIs, the number and proportion of undergraduates aged 50-plus is fewer than two per cent (Hill, 2005).

### **VPL processes at macro-level in the UK**

This section addresses national VPL processes as a macro-level focus. National legislation, strategy and guidance focused on VPL are all addressed. Key organisations involved in administration of VPL are considered as well as the financing of VPL generally and for target groups at national level. The roles of different VPL professionals are considered, alongside the main VPL functions, the organisation of quality assurance systems for VPL and the relationship of VPL to the national qualification framework.

Elements of VPL are influenced by the dialogue on inclusion, diversity and equality (Hockings, 2010) and the present study found that aspects of VPL are influenced differentially in UK universities by policy, practice and culture. For the present study, a representative sample of eight of the 126 universities in England and Wales was selected for exploration of the approaches to VPL. Selection criteria included the HEIs' geographical location and a good cross-representation of universities across England and Wales. For the purposes of this chapter, they are given pseudonyms, as indicated in Table 2:

Table 2: Representative sample of 8 universities in England and Wales

|                   |
|-------------------|
| Yellow University |
| Orange University |
| Green University  |
| Brown University  |
| Purple University |
| Blue University   |
| Red University    |
| Pink University   |

Whilst considering the influence of legislation on VPL, it was necessary to consider those institutions that have direct reference to, for example, the European Universities' Charter on Life Long Learning (European University Association, 2008) as well as those that have indirect impact on practices. In the UK, all institutions must comply with the Equality Act (2010), though organisations often publish their own policies and schemes that incorporate the Equality Act (HMG, 2010) for example, advice for students with a disability is provided by UCAS (2014a).

A set of policies and related concepts was indicated in data gathered from the public domain for the selected UK HEIs; this provides a national overview of the influence of legislation on VPL in HEIs in the UK (Table 3). Whilst policies generally related directly to legislation, related concepts were often embedded within policies and were indirectly influenced by legislation. Further analysis indicated that each of the policies and related concepts related to policy, practice or culture, or a combination of each.

In the UK VPL is usually referred to as APL - Accreditation of Prior Learning. This overall term defines the process. Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL) is used to award specific credits to students for learning that has been recognised and certificated by another awarding body. Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) is used to award credits to students for learning gained through work or other life experiences that are relevant to the student's intended programme of study (Garnett, Portwood and Costley, 2004).

The use of APEL in the HE sector developed from the pioneering work of the *Learning from Experience Trust* (Evans 1988) and in 1986 the academic credit for mature entry was provided by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), the academic awarding body for the polytechnics and other non-university institutions such as colleges of higher education. The CNAA legitimised APEL in HE with a specific regulation: 'Appropriate learning at higher education level, wherever it occurs, provided it can be assessed, can be given credit towards an academic award' (CNAA, 1986). This development drew heavily on the work of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) in the USA and was driven by the perceived need to extend access to HE for mature students at a time when it was feared that demographic trends would severely

restrict numbers of 18-year-olds seeking entry to higher education. Thus the initial primary purpose of APEL was to increase the supply of students to HE. Nevertheless, each individual institution retains autonomy for applications.

*Table 3: A National Overview of the Influence of Legislation on VPL in UK HEIs*

| <b>Policy / Related Concept</b>    | <b>Brief overview</b>   | <b>Policy Practice Culture</b> | <b>Adherence by sample HEIs [out of 8]</b> |
|------------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|--|
| Anti-Discrimination                | Policies or legislations which are used to protect people from discrimination   | Policy                         | 8  |
| Implementation                     | Plans and actions for promoting policies which regard to equality and diversity   | Practice                       | 8  |
| Protect Group                      | Diversity groups of people who need to be protected by equality legislation or policy from discrimination   | Policy Practice                | 8  |
| Manager Responsibility             | Management responsibilities for ensuring making sure the objectives and outcomes of the policy are achieved   | Practice                       | 8  |
| Inclusion                          | Responsibility and capability to create a welcoming inclusive atmosphere, climate or environment in order to value and promote diversity  | Culture                        | 7  |
| Access Ability                     | University's ability for accessing disabled students in their enrolment, recording keeping, confidentiality, and individual learning plan   | Practice                       | 7  |
| General Duties                     | Provision of broad guidelines to promote equality (race, disability and gender)   | Practice Culture               | 7  |
| Attitude                           | Attitudes or beliefs that impact upon the students with disabilities or their inclusion in the university   | Culture                        | 6  |
| Disability Discrimination Act 1995 | Legislation   | Policy                         | 5  |
| Physical Access                    | Accessibility of facilities, accommodation and building for disabled students   | Practice                       | 5  |
| Legislative Requirement            | Requirement of policies, initiatives and legislations in promoting, ensuring and monitoring the implementation of equality and diversity  | Policy                         | 5  |
| Learning Support Assistant/Advisor | Workers who support learning  | Practice Culture               | 4  |
| Communication                      | Working with external organizations, relevant stakeholders or internal department to include input and involvement in relevant activities across the campus   | Practice Culture               | 4  |
| Policy Committee                   | The committee in the university which is responsible for (a) ensuring the aims regarding equality and diversity are met and (b) fostering a working and learning environment in which staff and students can fulfil their potential | Policy                         | 4  |
| Disclosing Disabilities            | Why, how, what the university does to disclose disabilities   | Practice                       | 3  |

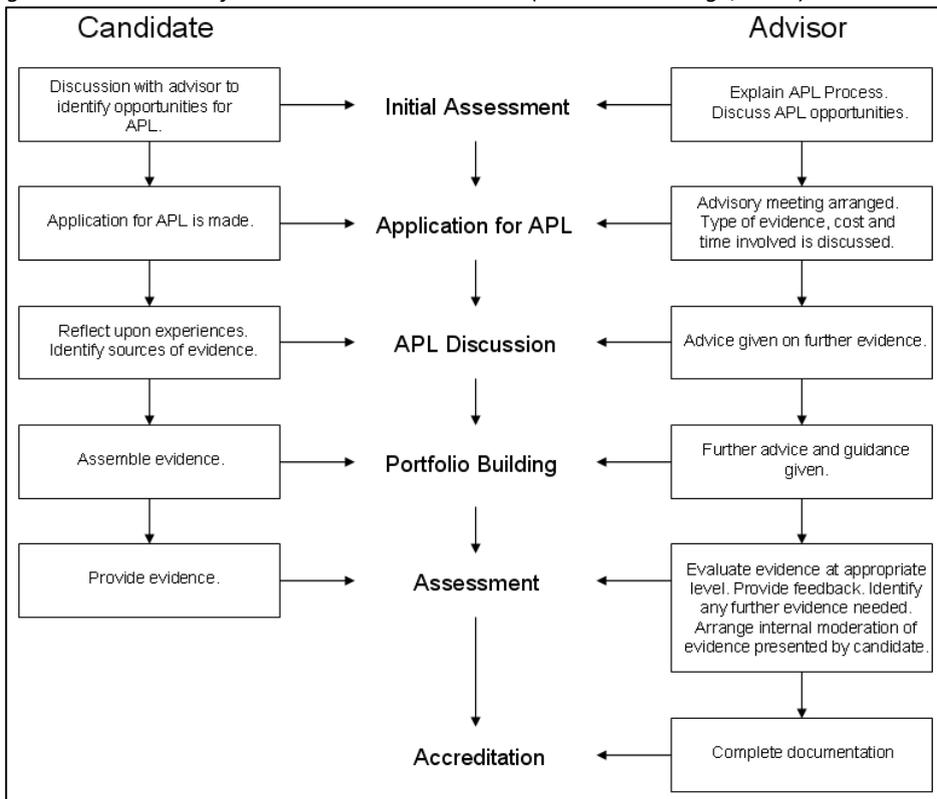
|   |  |                     |   |
|---|--|---------------------|---|
| Enrolment   | Official policy with regard to enrolment in the university   | Policy              | 3 |
| Confidentiality                                   | Confidentiality of disabled students' disclosing their disabilities  | Practice<br>Culture | 3 |
| Assessment  | Any form of assessment, monitoring and review of a student with disability   | Practice            | 3 |
| Individual Responsibility                         | Individual disabled and non-disabled students' responsibility to co-operate in making sure the objectives and the outcomes of the policy are achieved  | Culture             | 3 |
| Learning Support Facilitator                      | Workers who co-ordinate support  | Practice<br>Culture | 3 |
| Individual Study Plan                             | Formulation or implementation of tailored plans for disabled students to support their learning in the university  | Practice            | 3 |
| Inclusive Curriculum Project                      | The curriculum system which is established by the university to fit and promote needs of students with disabilities and special educational needs  | Practice<br>Culture | 3 |
| Examination Access                                | An examination which is designed by the university for disabled students   | Policy<br>Practice  | 3 |
| Learner Development Service                       | Services which ensure that disabled students and students with specific learning difficulties, such as dyslexia have appropriate study related support   | Practice<br>Culture | 2 |
| Short Term Disabled                               | Disabled students with short-term injuries or illness, which are likely to last less than 12 months and are not covered by the provision of the DDA (2005) / Equality Act (2010)                           | Practice            | 2 |
| Development and Training                          | Training provided by the university to promote programmes and development for disabled students  | Practice<br>Culture | 2 |
| Data Protection Act 1998                          | Legislation  | Policy              | 1 |
| Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 | Legislation  | Policy              | 1 |
| Human Right Act 1998                              | Legislation  | Policy              | 1 |
| Equality Act (2010)                               | Legislation  | Policy              | 1 |
| Mentor  | Workers who support students' learning and pastoral needs  | Practice<br>Culture | 1 |
| Disabled Students File                            | Profiles held by campus administration group, including disabled students' contact details, individual learning plan, assessment and other records related to the students' learning and living in the HEI | Practice            | 1 |
| Student Complaint Procedure                       | Protocol for how complaints from students are reported to the Governance Committee on a regular basis  | Policy<br>Practice  | 1 |
| Child Care Provision                              | Refers to the service which will be able to look after children for the parent students studying in the HEI.   | Practice<br>Culture | 1 |

Alongside following European guidance for VPL processes (CEDEFOP, 2007), UK universities have national guidelines for VPL processes to which they can refer (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), 2004). Moreover, separate documentation on assessment of students' APL has been provided by QAA (2011b),

which provides fifteen indicators for assessment. In the UK, the key organisations involved in administration of VPL include the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) (UCAS, 2014b), the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) which is responsible for safeguarding standards and improving the quality of UK higher education (QAA, 2014). Moreover, UK institutions take note of CEDEFOP (2009).

Currently, the UK government policy document 'Students at the Heart of the System' (DBIS, 2011) is driving the legislation nationally, but as mentioned, Welsh students are financed more generously by government than English students. The focus in DBIS (2011) is on ensuring education continues beyond school, improving the student experience, changing funding arrangements, increasing social mobility via HE and above all serving the economy. Nevertheless, a cynical attitude to VPL has often been adopted in the UK (Evans, 2003).

Figure 1: VPL Process for Advisors and Candidates (Blake Hall College, 2010).



Over many years, different funding bodies from both private and public sectors have been involved in financing VPL in the UK (Learning Experience Trust (LET), 2013). However, a more strategic approach was taken in England from 2005 to 2010: HEFCE

provided development funding to pilot flexible provision in eight 'pathfinder' HEIs. The programme included SEND and mature students in its target groups and participant HEIs reported successful development of flexible provision, especially work-based learning and student increases over the time of the project (Outram, 2011).

In the UK, VPL professionals usually have a clearly defined role within each institution in the process which involves scrutiny, mapping of qualification or experiential learning to the learning outcomes of the modules and programmes of study. Whilst these roles are not standardised across universities, distinction is generally made between a VPL Advisor and VPL Assessor (Day, 2002). According to Day (2002), the main functions of the VPL Advisor are helping the individual to identify relevant learning, agreeing and contributing to an action plan to demonstrate prior learning and helping the individual to prepare and present evidence for assessment. An example of the stages involved in this process is given in Figure 1 (Blake Hall College, 2010). Conversely, the role of the VPL Assessor includes agreeing to and reviewing an assessment plan, judging evidence and providing feedback and making an assessment decision and giving feedback.

All students in the UK will usually have access to a range of assessment opportunities to provide evidence for VPL:

- Oral questioning.
- Letters of authentication from work regarding previous learning.
- Qualification certificates.
- Employer references.
- Independent references.
- In-company training.
- Supporting documentation such as job descriptions.

Nevertheless, in the UK, quality assurance is addressed nationally by the QAA, although individual HEIs generally have internal QA procedures in the UK. VPL can be administered at any point of the UK national qualification framework (QAA, 2008) (Figure 2).

UK HEIs have their own policies in response to the legislation. This may be within the admissions policy or, more usually, within a separate VPL policy. For example, Purple University has a clear VPL policy and procedure that covers roles and responsibilities of the Admissions Team, Admissions Tutors, Senior Admissions Tutors, Programme Leaders, the University APEL Champion and the VPL Sub-Group. The membership of the VPL Sub-Group is outlined and precedents, timescales, turnaround times, fees and processes are all addressed. Equally, Green University highlights its VPL 'Scheme' in which exemptions, transfer options and verification are emphasized.

Figure 2: National Qualifications Framework (adapted from QAA, 2008)

| UNIVERSITY                    |  |                               |   |                                   |
|-------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| LEVEL 8                       | Doctorate (PhD, EdD, DPhil)                                    |                               |   |                                   |
| LEVEL 7                       | Master's Degree (MA, MSc, MPhil)                               |                               |   |                                   |
| LEVEL 6                       | University Degree (BA, BSc, BEd)                               |                               |   |                                   |
| LEVEL 5                       |  | Foundation Degree (FdA, FdSc) |   | Higher National Diploma (HND)     |
| LEVEL 4                       |  |                               |   | Higher National Certificate (HNC) |
| SCHOOL / 6 <sup>TH</sup> FORM |  | FURTHER EDUCATION (FE)        | COLLEGE   |                                   |
| LEVEL 3                       | Advanced (A) Levels  | A2<br>AS                      | Level 3 Extended Diploma (National Diploma)<br>Level 3 Diploma (National Certificate) |                                   |
| LEVEL 2                       | General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) (Grades A-C) |                               | Level 2 Diploma (1 <sup>st</sup> Diploma)   |                                   |
| LEVEL 1                       | General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) (Grades D-G) |                               | Level 1 Diploma (Foundation)  |                                   |
| LEVEL 3                       | Key Stage 3  |                               | E3 Diploma (Foundation)   |                                   |

At UK HEI level, responsibility for the management of VPL varies. For example, at Yellow University responsibility rests with an Admissions Policy Subcommittee, while at Purple University the Student and Academic Services Team is responsible. At Green University a Programme Committee manages VPL, at Brown University the University Accreditation Board has responsibility, at Blue University the Programme Leader or Director, the Admissions Tutor and Senior Leadership Team all manage the process and at both Red and Pink Universities responsibility for VPL management rests with the Faculty team.

Equally, UK HEIs have different approaches to decision-making about awarding VPL. At Yellow University, a clear process is mapped and involves the Admissions Office, Admissions Tutor, VPL Admissions Tutor, Faculty VPL Adviser and VPL Subgroup depending on the complexity of the case. Meanwhile, at Orange University decisions are made by an Accreditation Panel comprising members of each course board. At Brown University, the Admissions Manager consults with the Programme Leader for APCL and the Institute for Work Based Learning for APEL applications and at Green University the Programme Leader or relevant Head of Department decides. At Purple University, each faculty has at least one VPL tutor: the tutor works with the Admissions Team in making the initial decision. The Admissions Tutor and Senior Admissions Tutor both sign off the paperwork after applying the policy, mapping the VPL and awarding the specified number of credits. This is then considered by the VPL Sub-group who ratify or do not ratify the VPL – the VPL Sub-group is where the ultimate responsibility for the decision is

taken. At Blue University, faculty Learning and Teaching Committees make the awarding decisions, while at Red University decisions are taken at Faculty or Course Team level. Finally, at Pink University, VPL is referred to External Examiners. Special processes are available for appeals against decisions at all the sample UK HEIs, with the exception of Green University, where resubmission is possible.

In terms of who supports and guides candidates through the VPL process, a variety of sources is available. All sample universities have reference to VPL within their online materials. Additionally, as mentioned, Purple University has an APEL champion who advises, mentors students producing portfolios, supports the assessment and validation process, sits on the APL Sub-group and provides training for students in the process. Furthermore, at Purple, Yellow and Blue Universities, Admissions Tutors and Officers and the Admissions Teams provide initial information packs and all the relevant forms for the process. Student Advisers are available at Pink and Green Universities and Faculty Advisers at Yellow University. At Red, Orange and Blue Universities, programme leaders or course teams provide the information candidates need to support and guide them through the VPL process.

To assess VPL candidate applications, most UK HEIs adopt five underpinning values and principles for VPL data collection. Information provided by the student must be:

- Current
- Sufficient to cover the learning outcomes of a unit/units or part thereof.
- Authentic
- Relevant (appropriate) to the module or part thereof to which the student wishes to apply for VPL
- Valid

Candidates are required to provide evidence. This takes a variety of forms and includes:

- Certificates
- Transcripts of study
- Syllabuses and learning outcomes of previous study
- CV
- References from employers or institutions/ testimonials
- Evidence of Continuing Professional Development (CPD)
- Reflective statement
- Portfolio

Some universities may also apply the following:

- Interview
- Attendance at a workshop or module to support APL
- Observation of performance
- Presentation
- Assessment of skills
- Exam taken for relevant module

Within the VPL process, more evidence is generally needed for Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) than Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL). All universities map the learning to the appropriate module of programme of study learning objectives. This is the joint responsibility of the student and the designated member(s) of staff. Two examples of UK HEIs' required evidence for VPL assessment are given below in Table 4:

*Table 4: Examples of UK HEIs' required evidence for VPL assessment*

|                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| <i>Yellow University</i> | Transcripts of study, certificates, syllabus and learning outcomes of previous study, portfolio if required.<br>For APCL older than 5 years - CV detailing employment and CPD (evidenced), reflective statement explaining how learning has been maintained, employer reference.  |
| <i>Pink University</i>   | Mapping learning achieved to the learning outcomes of the module. APEL - Structured interview plus corroborating evidence, work based observation plus portfolio or other record. Assessment which may include assessment/ exam set for relevant approved module / unit of study. |

In relation to VPL, all the sample UK universities make reference to expert groups in their literature, indicating that they engage with them. Links to key organisations are on the sample UK HEI websites. Some are nationwide support or expert groups but some universities use local networks. Examples of local networks include the North London Regional Access Centre (for DSA assessments), the Access Summit Resource Centre and Bristol Mental Health services. National networks are also listed in most of the sample UK HEIs' literature. Named national networks with whom the sample UK HEIs work include the National Autistic Society, Royal National Institute for the Blind, Royal National Institute for the Deaf, Mind and the British Dyslexia association. Furthermore, Orange University overtly names organisations consulted as part of the development of its equality and diversity policy.

The financial management of VPL within UK HEIs is not specified in most UK HEI VPL policies but the cost of VPL would be available to specific students on application. At Purple University, there is a standard fee of £150 for APEL claims and an administration fee of £50 is charged for APCL claims. Finance is seen as a specific barrier to APL – this emerged in the micro-level data for the UK.

All sampled UK HEIs have a procedure for quality assurance for assessing the effectiveness of VPL at institutional level. This procedure is usually conducted through a specific committee. For example, at Yellow University, the Admissions Policy Subcommittee reports to the Senate Committee's Quality, Enhancement and Standards Committee. At Green University the Programme Committee conducts the procedure. Brown University involves its External Examiners involvement and at Purple University

the VPL Subgroup reports to the University's Academic Quality and Standards Committee.

In relation to maintenance of records relating to applications and the support provided, across all the sampled UK HEIs, VPL is clearly identified on all documentation, including student results records and transcripts. This is presented to the external examiners as appropriate. All mapping is recorded.

Each VPL claim is made by the students using the appropriate forms. Moreover, a precedents list is kept by universities to ensure smooth running of the processes. Some examples of records include student transcripts (Yellow, Purple and Red Universities) as well as a student achievement profile presented to Award Board for APEL at Purple University. Green University records each decision on a special form and there, application for APEL must be included in sample of student's work considered by External Examiners. Finally, Pink University supplies students with VPL with a 'Certificate of Credit'.

At meso-level, individual sampled UK HEIs do not identify institutional barriers to the implementation of VPL. However, other literature is more elucidating. For example, Crichton (2008) cites the perception of students and staff that portfolio preparation and assessment as part of the APEL process is onerous and this prevents its more widespread use. Equally, Aylott and Northrop (2010) identify cost and time as barriers to successful VPL in UK HEIs: practical time management issues tend to impact on staff workloads. McKee (2003) found that UK HEIs sometimes find it difficult to match the level of prior learning to academic levels; prior learning is frequently matched to only part of a unit so does not cover all learning outcomes. McKee (2003) also recommended that programmes should be flexible so that students can access separate sections. Nevertheless, A further finding showed that student group cohesion can be reduced if some students do not have to complete elements of the programme.

Conversely, there are some UK HEIs where VPL is well introduced. Analysis of policies and procedures at the sampled UK HEIs shows that each has its own strengths. For example, Yellow University has useful flowcharts and clear procedures outlining the APL process while Orange University's postgraduate courses outline VPL on the website. Purple University's policy is recommended as good practice in a Best Practice Guide (McKee, 2013); Purple University's APEL Champion, appointed to support students and advise staff, also seems an asset. Blue University provides clear procedures available on the internet, while Green University's 'Scheme for the Admission of Students with Advanced Standing Following Accreditation of Prior Learning' is noteworthy. Equally, there is evidence of VPL introduced in the voluntary sector in the UK to support student development (JISC, 2008). Moreover, Brown University actively markets the availability and benefits of APEL and APCL to voluntary organisations. Finally, this section turns to successes reported for VPL at meso-level). Given the wealth of data available on UK HEI VPL policies and procedures, it is a little surprising that little published data exists with

focus on the successes of VPL at HEI level. Generic examples of success stories include Houston, Hoover and Beer (1997) and Chettiparamb, (2008).

### **VPL processes at micro-level in the UK**

At UK micro-level, ten individual case studies were co-constructed for the present study. The case studies focused on the two target groups: HE students with SEND and HE students aged 5-plus. Pseudonyms were given to the case study participants:

1. Elaine, Student aged 50-plus
2. Claire, Student with SEND
3. John, Student aged 50-plus
4. Louise, Student with SEND
5. Jane, Person aged 50-plus
6. Suzy, Student with SEND
7. Peter, Student aged 50-plus
8. Jenny, Student aged 50-plus
9. Rachael, Student with SEND *and* aged 50-plus
10. Jack, Student aged 50-plus

The break-down of the micro-level sample comprises three participants with SEND, six participants aged 50-plus and one participant who had SEND and was also aged 50-plus. At the micro-level, a number of considerations were made for the study and these are discussed in this section. The ways information is provided for candidates in relation to VPL and the accessibility of that information are addressed. Individuals' main motivations for their interest in VPL are covered. The section also explores institutional barriers to VPL encountered by individuals in learning and in work contexts, as well as personal barriers. Sources of support for individuals making applications for VPL are addressed as is the role played by the individual in VPL. The availability of training for self-management of competences is considered, as are cost implications of VPL for individuals and successes reported for VPL at micro level.

Data indicate that information is provided for candidates in relation to VPL through UK HEI websites which display policies and practice as well as application forms in some cases. Examples include Yellow, Purple and Green Universities. Face-to-face meetings are also provided in many UK cases. Among the present study's UK micro-level data, the following emerged:

- Having read the university's online information, Suzy was able to make a personal request to the University and they responded; other universities she applied to offered information but did not respond personally to Suzy.
- Rachael found a course entry online on the university website as well as a hard copy university prospectus provided by the HEI faculty. She encountered face-to-face disability support provided by the university student support team.

- Jack was offered a face-to-face meeting with his course tutor at the application stage

Information is generally accessible via UK HE websites but these sites tend to have variable levels of guidance. For example, Brown University's procedure for accepting students with advanced standing is transparent, whereas students have to go through a gatekeeper at Red University: VPL is mentioned on the programme specification alongside an invitation to e-mail for further details. Moreover, Pink University restricts access to information and guidance to those holding login details.

The main motivations for individuals' interest in VPL in the UK seem to vary. Focus on personal development emerged as one motivation. For example, having been educated abroad after his family emigrated many years previously, John (aged 50-plus) had completed his first year of university and then returned to the UK for family reasons. After years working in the IT sector he decided to make a career change and enrolled on the degree course. The need for certification or qualification for insertion or promotion was a second motivation. For example, Claire had recently been diagnosed with dyslexia. She described herself as not having done very well in school. Claire had worked as a nurse and a community social worker but it was whilst working as a secondary school teaching assistant that the SENCO suggested that she could embark on an education degree which would be funded by the school. The need to have recognised qualifications in order to be recruited is a third motivation that emerged from the data. With cerebral palsy and associated speech and language difficulties, Suzy is a wheelchair user and requires assistance with much of her personal care. Her educational history includes time in a special school, followed by a period in mainstream education where she reports she was bullied. She attended a local vocational college to gain some academic qualifications whilst doing voluntary and paid work in care homes and children's homes. She then attended a specialist vocational college where she did a course in child care. Having completed a BA (Hons.) degree in Social Work, Suzy now works as a self-employed disability advocate working mainly in schools. A final motivation for individuals' interest in VPL in the UK is focus on personal development linked to a specific situation. For example, Jenny found a long career in the financial sector was not recognised as VPL for entry to an initial teacher training degree course so undertook an Access Course which was acceptable.

Individuals in UK HEIs reported encountering institutional barriers to VPL in both learning and working contexts. These comprised:

- a) Some institutions do not transfer qualifications and experience between disciplines
- b) Retention of support staff
- c) Poor employability post-university.
- d) Time management for assignment submission
- e) Lack of access to support services
- f) Separate applications for each assignment extensions are required, despite diagnosis of specific learning difficulty.

- g) Differentiation can marginalise students
- h) When a course is taken part-time over a longer period to support a student with SEN or a disability, students lose contact with supportive peers who complete the course full time.
- i) Lack of help for completing application for additional support assistant so application was not completed and no additional support assistant was provided
- j) Age may be a reason why candidates do not present with contemporary qualifications regarded as pre-requisite for study but this factor is not considered sufficient reason by itself for exemption from entry requirement
- k) National requirements imposing on institutional entry requirements
- l) HE advisor and government advisor advice contrary to legal requirement

Given the wide range of reported barriers, examples for just three are included, within the scope of this article:

- (c) Poor employability post-university: following university, Suzy found employers unwilling to offer flexible support for her disabilities as she endeavoured to enter work place.
- (e) Lack of access to support services: even though she was diagnosed with dyslexia, Louise found that she could not gain access to specialist dyslexia tutors in her UK HEI.
- (l) HE advisor and government advisor advice contrary to legal requirement: Jenny was advised that her age (50-plus) would be a barrier to her entering an initial teacher training degree course.

Individuals also report a range of personal barriers to accessing VPL. These include:

- Concern about disclosure of SEND: Claire had always hidden her dyslexia and it was difficult for her to disclose her needs and accept the help that was available to her.
- Social exclusion: Louise, a dyslexic student who took the course part-time when most other students were full time felt that during group presentations she was left to work with the students no-one else wanted to work with, who do not work hard or get high grades and this had an impact on grades for the whole group, including her own.
- Access to HE courses may not provide sufficient information about HE study: Jenny would have liked her Access to HE course to give her better knowledge, understanding and skills about the nature of HE study.
- Having to identify and negotiate support whilst trying to manage newly acquired disability: An expectation that Rachael should find her own proof-reader was difficult for her with a newly acquired visual impairment and she found university support team did not listen to her. She reported they lacked flexibility and were neither supportive nor approachable.

Four support sources emerged for individuals in relation to making applications for VPL:

- Anti-discrimination legislation : in respect of SEND, Claire, Louise, Suzy and Rachael found anti-discrimination legislation supported their VPL applications
- HEIs: John's HEI regarded his qualifications gained outside the UK and his career experience as VPL.
- Employers: Elaine and Claire were provided with positive endorsements from employers that supported their VPL applications.
- Qualified counsellors: Louise, Suzy and Rachael had their needs assessed and recommendations given by counsellors qualified in respect of their individual needs.

UK individuals scored their role as agents in the VPL process and the majority perceived themselves as the 'client-to-be-guided' rather than claiming agency for the VPL process which has the potential to shape their lifelong outcomes:

- Score 1 for independent, strong, co-producer: Rachael
- Score 2 for average, client-to-be-guided: Claire, John, Jane, Suzy, Peter, Jenny, Jack
- Score 3 for dependent, no control: Elaine, Louise,

Aligned with this point, there seems to be no product in evidence for training self-management of competences. However, occasionally an explicit expectation is articulated by the institution. For example, Purple University states in its documentation:

*"...you have significant responsibility for the management of your support. It is therefore essential that we discuss your individual needs as we understand that having support in place at the start of your course is critical to your success. We will therefore be in contact with you if you indicate that you are disabled on your course application"*

Equally, whilst Rachael found that her HEI expected her to find her own proof-reader, this was difficult for her with a newly acquired visual impairment.

On a more positive note, there is no evidence of cost incurred by individual students for the VPL process. Dyslexia tutors were provided for Claire at no cost to her. Louise was not charged for taking her course part-time rather than full-time or for a computer provided by her HEI. Suzy found that the cost of her support assistants was borne by her home local authority and Jack found that he incurred no cost for the HEI's waiving of traditional entry requirements. Moreover, Rachael found that her disability assessment was free and that costs for a laptop, software, recording device, transport and proof-reading service were all met through an allowance that was granted as a result.

Finally, all but one of the individual case studies reported successes regarding VPL, indicating that it is working positively in UK HEIs at least some of the time at micro-level for students with SEND and students who are aged 50+. The experiences reported by case study individuals indicated that VPL may:

- release a student from study time .

- enable a student to complete a nationally recognised degree and make a career move.
- enable a student to fulfil an ambition .
- provide for allowance of additional time needed to complete and submit assignments , complete tasks and work alongside degree.
- provide access to specialist support tutors for academic and moral support.
- provide access to a laptop and software.
- lead to greater job satisfaction.
- lead to progression through a degree.
- enable a student to engage with peers of different ages.
- enable non-traditional students to access higher education.
- lead to students believing they are treated equitably.
- ensure personalised nature of provision that recognises individual need and is flexible enough to make adjustments to HEIs' existing procedures.

Only Suzy who had the most complex needs of the case study individuals did not report success regarding VPL.

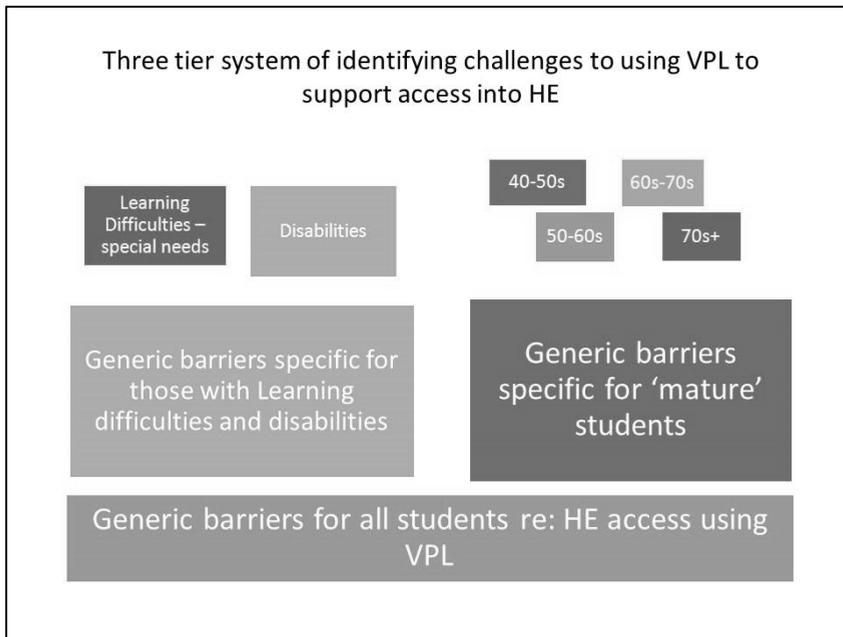
### **Conclusion**

Having contextualised the UK's position in regard to its citizens' access to HE, this chapter has laid out findings addressing the UK perspective in the European AllinHE study. The chapter has revealed support and barriers for VPL in UK HEIs at macro-, meso- and micro-levels and it has focused on two marginalised groups: students with SEND and students who are aged 50-plus. The three tier model of identification (Figure 3) was developed as part of the present study to demonstrate the distinctions between general barriers to VPL for all students, generic barriers for target groups and specific barriers for target groups. The model indicates the potential impact on students classified as having a special need or disability (SEND) or being mature.

The UK picture of VPL supporting access to HE is varied. Policy, practice and culture affect VPL at macro-level, UK HEIs view their own VPL provision, policy and practice positively at meso-level, yet individuals who have experienced the macro- and meso-level structures indicating they are not always working as well as they are intended to do. Although the majority of individuals were able to report at least some level of success in regard to VPL, it is important to note that that all the UK case studies included in this project have studied in HE, so were not a representative sample of the population. A recommendation for future research would be to source a larger, more representative sample of individuals.

Nevertheless, the data indicate two major focus points where VPL is applied at least some of the time in the UK HEIs, resulting in some satisfaction for individuals: prior learning or experience reducing or eliminating entry requirements and allowances during the programme to ease individuals' progress through the degree.

Figure 3: Three tier model of identification



The present study indicates that once equality legislation is accounted for, the UK government tends to devolve many of the VPL processes relating to access to HE to HEIs. Whilst aspects of the VPL processes are evident in most UK HEIs, there is a lack of consistency and transparency so that individuals attempting to access HE often find it difficult to navigate their way through the VPL processes. In regard to access to HE and VPL processes, an unequal power relationship exists between HEIs and individuals, weighted towards HEIs; this especially disadvantages marginalised groups who are likely to be in the greatest need of access to VPL processes in order to access HE.

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# Multidimensional and multi-target approach to VPL in Switzerland

# 8

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## Valuing learning and competences of qualified immigrant women: three case studies

Furio Bednarz and Giovanna Bednarz

### Introduction

This chapter focuses on the results of the piloting of the *AllinHE* Model in Switzerland. Practices concerned with the Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) in the Swiss context are discussed and bottom-up and top down rubrics, as well as multidimensional and multi-target approaches to VPL are considered. From one social group, three case studies are drawn on to exemplify the discussion. The pilot methodology and research path are explained then learners' experiences are discussed, in relation to access routes to VPL, processes, outcomes, successes, difficulties encountered by the learners and opportunities and threats in the development of VPL. Final remarks are made to conclude the chapter.

### The context: VPL practices in Switzerland

#### *Between bottom-up and top-down logic*

Approaches to Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) are quite well articulated in Switzerland, through experiences and practices developed in the field during the last 20 years. During the last decade, a bottom-up approach to VPL (typical of the first phase) has been integrated with the design and approval of a legal basis and general rules defining a top-down scenario; this has enhanced the role of summative VPL (BBT, 2008; Salini, Petrini, Voit, Bednarz, 2010; Salini, Petrini, Voit, 2012). The shifting from bottom-up to top-down approaches, however, took place with significant participation by actors and stakeholders. The long VPL story started in Switzerland from initiatives promoted since the fifties by members of the civil society, local organisations, NGOs and professional groups; since the beginning, bottom-up and top-down approaches have played an important role, through a continuous interaction between local and national projects at different levels of the educational system and in diverse professional contexts. Roughly speaking, three different periods in the evolution of VPL can be identified in the Swiss experience: the pioneer phase (before the 1990s), the spreading of local initiatives (during the 1990s) and the phase of institutionalisation and diffusion throughout the national territory (starting from the beginning of years 2000).

The birth of validation practices in Switzerland is normally agreed to be 1952, with the creation of the Swiss Register for engineers, technicians and architects (REG) providing experienced practitioners without recognised certificates with the possibility of registration “via” a dossier. More than twenty years after this (1977), another fundamental step forward was made with the approval of admission procedures to the University of Geneva based on an individual dossier, allowing candidates to overcome the lack of an upper secondary education diploma. However, it is only since the 1990s that an authentic development of VPL has been identified, with a large number of initiatives developed at a local level, especially (but not only) in the French-speaking regions of the country. Early initiatives were introduced for the most part by non-profit organisations, as well as by public or private guidance centres; they progressively paved the way for the creation of formal qualification procedures. These included the Establishment of the Geneva Skills Assessment Centre (CEBIG) in 1993, the establishment of the Association for the Recognition of non-formal and informal learning (ARRA) in 1996, the development of the first Cantonal Regulation on recognition and validation in Valais in 1997, and the establishment of the CH-Q Association in 1999. More progress has been made during the last 15 years: in 2001 the Cantons of Geneva and Valais approved two Cantonal Acts on Adult Education and Training, defining also a solid legal basis for validation. Equally, in 2001 the Valida Association was founded, with the aim of developing a Swiss-wide system for the recognition and validation of prior learning, and in the same year the Swiss Federation for Adult Learning (SVEB) delivered the first titles of “Adult Trainer” through an Equivalence Assessment Procedure.

Taking into consideration the practices mentioned above, it is possible to appreciate the shifting from pioneer experiences based on VPL as *recognition* (including valuation) of learning outcomes to *validation of learning outcomes* in a formal sense, leading to an official qualification (for a glossary of validation in Switzerland: see also Voit, Sassen, 2011). This shift corresponds to a parallel evolution of VPL modes, from formative to summative, from grass-root to more structured perspectives. In 2002 the Federal law regulating Vocational and Professional (higher level) Education and Training (entered in force in 2004) created the legal basis for VPL as a means for achieving a qualification (VPETA - 13.12.2002 – art. 9, 32 and 33 concerning qualification processes and procedures in VET - [http://www.admin.ch/ch/e/rs/c412\\_10.html](http://www.admin.ch/ch/e/rs/c412_10.html)). This act regulates IVET and PET pathways (Tertiary B sector). In addition, a further driver for VPL will emerge in the near future in the form of the new Federal Act addressed to Continuous Vocational Training, expected to come into force in 2015 -2016. This act will define for the first time general rules for the lifelong learning sector, including a general right to the validation and accreditation of non-formal learning outcomes.

Essentially, existing laws do not define an individual “right” to validation in Switzerland (as, for instance, in France). They enlarge, however, the perspectives opened by different competence management initiatives launched at local and sectoral levels during recent decades. Validation is an alternative to traditional qualification paths in diverse vocational profiles, even if limited for the moment to IVET and to some PET

qualifications. In this field VPL is strictly summative, but it coexists with complementary approaches, in which recognition and validation of learning outcomes open different perspectives, such as (a) admission to a cycle of studies on the basis of a dossier, (b) exemptions from preparatory training, in order to pass a qualification exam or assessment or (c) certification of competences, including key skills, as a component of a qualification.

In the last phase, the implementation of the new legal basis defined by the federal VET Act, opened once again the door to grass-root initiatives, and bottom-up approaches. The *National Guidelines for Validating Prior Learning Outcomes* (BBT, 2010) were elaborated, activating a participative mechanism (the VA Platform) involving all relevant stakeholders active in the field. These guidelines, originally conceived as general guidelines for the development of VPL in any educational sector, were approved fully by the Federal Authorities in 2011, after a 3 years piloting phase.

The document mentioned above defines a process articulated in five steps:

- 1) *Information and consultancy (Accompagnement / Begleitung)*: permitting the people involved in the validation process to inform and orient themselves in relation to the possibilities and methods to be implemented. This stage might be entrusted to organisations or institutions concerned with training and orientation and to professional world.
- 2) *Bilan (de Compétences)*: this is a core preparatory phase, in which trainees, possibly supported by consultants and coaches, look over their own learning and recognise and evaluate their own skills to produce a personal Portfolio.
- 3) *Assessment*: a crucial phase of the procedure when people claiming for credits linked to certain skills, or a whole qualification, are assessed by professional experts, on the basis of their dossier, and of an interview (and eventually of additional proofs and methods) in order to verify the coherence between their competences and the requirements defined by qualifications and standards.
- 4) *Validation*: at this stage an official commission delivers on the basis of assessment reports, an attestation referred to competences that can be recognised, as well as remarks concerning complementary training needed to achieve a whole qualification.
- 5) *Certification*: this stage represents the final stage of the process; an official commission delivers the qualification summing up attestations of competences gained in informal and non-formal settings and validated (phase 4) and attestations referred to learning outcomes acquired through complementary training and exams.

Now the implementation largely depends on local initiatives and social partners, Beyond the VPL practices addressed to specific qualifications, parallel diverse VPL practices continue to be developed by NGOs, associations, VET bodies and social partners, according to different aims and targets.

Something is also beginning to happen at Higher Education level. VET, PET (Tertiary B sector) and HE (Tertiary A sector: Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences - UAS) are subject in Switzerland to different regulations, involving diverse actors and stakeholders. The Tertiary A sector is regulated by Federal law and that law is exclusively concerned with the UAS; however, within this Act are some principles that also refer to the need to address prior learning outcomes acquired in different settings, paving the road to VPL. Although Universities are currently almost free to organise themselves, a Federal Act aiming at coordinating HE is under discussion. Existing rules give autonomy to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as far as admission rules are concerned, and this includes valuation of prior learning. Nevertheless so far VPL is only marginally practised in this sector. In the Tertiary B sector (Higher PET exams) there are a few examples of VPL, but these are currently very limited (for example, Training of Adult Trainers and VET teachers, Community Interpreters and so on). In the Tertiary A sector, VPL is not strictly regulated, and it is very rarely practised as a means for admitting learners, for example, on the basis of a dossier, as there are no legal requirements for this. It is the responsibility of the HEIs role to go beyond this level, and the interest in the HE sector seems to be growing. For this reasons, we have focused one of our three case studies on the VPL procedures jointly defined by the University of Geneva and by the UAS of Western Switzerland, for delivering credits and exemptions to the learners. These procedures have been implemented in some Faculties (Sciences, Psychology, Economic and Social Sciences), and in addition for some Bachelor pathways of the UAS, in Social and Economic sectors, ICT and Architecture. For more details see <http://www.vae-formations.ch/>

#### *Multidimensional and multi-target approaches to VPL*

In our research we focused on highlighting to which extent, and in which sense, VPL in Switzerland could be considered a paradigm of multidimensional and multi-target potentialities. Focusing on one specific group of “VPL users” – qualified immigrant women experiencing difficulties in having their prior learning and competences valued in the local job market – we analysed three different aims addressed by activating a VPL path:

- **Individual empowerment**, through the self-recognition of competences, as a means for better planning redeployment and offering one’s own skills and competences in the job market;
- **Access to lifelong learning**, through the valuation of prior learning as a means for overcoming barriers and reducing the duration of formal tertiary education paths;
- **Access to an official qualification**, as a means for achieving visibility and accountability of skills and competences via recognition and validation of informal and non-formal learning.

Different VPL modes, often coexisting ones, can be identified in the practices focused on:

- **Reflective VPL** comes always to the fore, as far as the reflective elaboration of life, work and learning biographies of individuals is the basis for building up personal portfolios and for designing action plans

- **Formative VPL** enables learners decide what/where/how to spend their prior learning, both for valuing it in the job market, for further developing their profiles or formulating a career-step with the portfolio as a starting point
- **Summative VPL** finally plays a central function, both in access to lifelong learning and to a qualification, where personal portfolios are built up against pre-set standards, looking for an official diploma or for exemptions.

The study shows to which extent heterogeneity is the key word to explain how VPL actually works, confirming the usefulness of multidimensional and multi-target approaches. Goals of VPL users largely depend on the kind of VPL targets (empowerment, recognition, certification), as well as from the positioning of the persons in the life cycle, by their biographical background and professional identity. Local learning cultures and traditions also play a fundamental role. Diverse dimensions and VPL modes appear to be integrated, and should be considered under the lens of crosscutting links: between personal and professional goals, formative and summative meanings of VPL, roles of education, training and experience in formal and informal learning settings, targets of empowerment (individual), social and institutional recognition.

### **One group, three case studies**

The study focused on gender and origin (in)equalities, drawing on narratives of qualified women, with a migration background, who for different reasons exploited VPL as a means for improving their social and professional integration in the hosting country. Immigrants, permanently resident in the country, are a fundamental component of the Swiss population: they now account for more than 23 % of the whole population and about 30% of the workforce. These percentages grow up to 80-95 % in some professional fields, normally in manufacturing and low qualified services, where migrants are a fundamental resource for local employers. During recent decades, and particularly after the enforced entry in 2002 of the bilateral agreements on the free circulation of the workforce between EU and Switzerland, migration flows rapidly diversified. Now the migrant population consists of both unskilled and skilled employees. Equally, migrants coming from EU Member States can claim for recognition of their formal education levels and diplomas (even if with some difficulties). Conversely, individuals coming from non-EU countries are facing growing difficulties, both in obtaining work and residence permits and for making their prior learning visible. Legal entitlements to family reunifications have resulted in up to 45% of residence permits being issued annually to foreigners since the year 2000 and this has led to an emerging phenomenon: social segregation of a large component of newcomers. Qualified women joining their husbands or getting married to Swiss citizens are encountering difficulties related to their weak socio-professional profile in the hosting country. Processes for recognising the academic and professional qualifications of these women in Switzerland appear to be very complex, and this is particularly the case for women arriving from non-EU countries. Increasingly, immigrants feel the need to be supported in these processes and at the

same time a growing demand emerges, as far as access to further training and Tertiary A and B education are concerned.

Focusing on this relatively homogeneous target group, the study took into account three VPL dimensions:

- **VPL as a means for making competences and learning visible**, drawing on the results of some recent projects and initiatives (*Découvrir*, EFIS, *World Wide Women*)
- **VPL as a means for achieving a qualification, at least a first step in a career and lifelong learning pathway**, considering structured practices of validation (modular qualification path of adult trainers, *Valform*, *Qualification plus*)
- **VPL as an entry door to Higher Education**, considering the pilot initiative jointly promoted by the University of Geneva, and the University of Applied Sciences of Western Switzerland, for admitting adult learners to some faculties valuing their prior learning in form of credits delivered on the basis of a personal dossier, examined by an internal jury.

### **Methodology and Research Path**

Narratives are a powerful source for understanding how VPL can affect the evolution of learning, in an individual and societal perspective. In designing and implementing the study, a qualitative approach has been adopted, identifying some relevant practices in order to define the context feeding the development of VPL. There is much precedent for giving focus to life stories and biographies, putting individual experiences at the center of the analysis (see also a parallel study focusing on VPL as a means of access to Higher Education, developed by the University of Padova in Italy (Galliani, Zaggia, Serbati, 2011)). Existing surveys, as well as direct experiences gained in the field by the authors, facilitated the inventory of practices. Bottom-up logic was adopted to feed into intense networking activity. Individual learners belonging to the selected target audience, were contacted by institutions who promoted diverse modes of VPL in their different fields of interest.

Narratives provided the primary data for the research. They were collected through diverse means and according to different patterns. A pilot study was implemented initially. This was a learner's story, collected through an open biographical interview, and enabled the research approach to be tested as well as defining a structured set of questions to explore other learners' biographies. Subsequently, semi-structured face-to-face interviews involving fifteen learners took place, so that the narratives could be collected. The first part of each interview focused on the socio-professional profile of the interviewee, paying attention to migratory routes and to traits of personality. The second part focused on the relationship of interviewees with formal education, training and learning, while the third was focused on the transition from education to the workplace. The fourth and fifth parts focused on analysing in greater detail the personal lived experiences of dealing with procedures for recognition and validation of prior learning and rebuilding the various stages of the process with its difficulties, successes, strengths

and weaknesses. Semi-structured interviews took place, were recorded and subsequently partially transcribed.

The text and content of the transcribed narratives were analysed using software (*Tagxedo*) and a “tag clouding” technique. This enabled easy identification of recurrent key words used in the narratives. Contents were interrogated using a comparative grid that was set up to enable comparison with the results of national case studies developed in the framework of *AllinHE* project. Abstracts and quotations are also included in our chapter. However, the names of the interviewees have been replaced with pseudonyms, in order to safeguard the anonymity of those who shared their life stories. Additional data were provided by a set of narratives self-produced by fifteen further women who were involved in the *World Wide Women* project that ran in parallel to the main project. The *World Wide Women* project was an innovation project that included valuation of social learning and media production and was promoted by ECAP Foundation in Zürich and Basel. A final set of data came from a survey that drew on sixteen successful cases of validation. The survey was completed in November 2013 by the *Valida* Association<sup>9</sup> and provided valuable comparative data which confirmed most of the issues dealt with in our own work.

In the final phase, narratives and evidence were presented for discussion at a national stakeholders group. This discussion served to enrich analysis and interpretation by providing additional perspectives at national level whilst retaining the valuable lens of local experiences to validate views emerging from the narratives about VPL modes.

As planned, this research is based on three case studies in the context of VPL. The first case study considered VPL as a way to consolidate skills and make them understandable, according to an individual empowerment perspective. That was the case of some practices we focused on, beginning with the unique experience of *Découvrir*, an association active since the years 2000 in the French speaking regions of Switzerland. The ProAct training and coaching association *Découvrir* (<http://www.associationdecouvrir.ch>) has as its overall objective the support of qualified migrant women. It aims to improve and consolidate their social and professional integration in Switzerland, by restoring their confidence and encouraging a proactive approach to their employability. Several training modules have been offered during the last decade, as well as group sessions for discussion around a specific theme, for example, how to create and maintain a professional network, individual coaching sessions and the organisation of meetings open to the public.

Two further initiatives were examined. The first - the "EFIS" project (Employability of Italian Female immigrants in Switzerland) - promoted and implemented by ECAP Foundation ([www.ecap.ch](http://www.ecap.ch)) in 2010-2011 in Lausanne and Geneva, tested a blended training and empowerment path for the integration or reintegration in the local labour market. It provided guidance for improving computer and linguistic skills, as well as

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9 *Valida, Erfahrungen zur Geltung bringen*, Bern, 2013 ([www.valida.ch](http://www.valida.ch))

offering intensive support for job searching. The second - the *World Wide Women* project – adapted the EFIS approach to the German Swiss context. This adaptation provided an additional fertile context for detecting the potential of VPL for empowerment. The project improved methods and tools tested by EFIS and focused on how prior learning can be recognised and exploited by learners for developing their career plans. This was conducted at an individual level, but more importantly through exchanging experiences with others, in face to face sessions as well as through the use of virtual networking tools.

The second and the third case studies took into account VPL as a means to validate and certify the results of complex individual learning processes, and usually linked in experiential learning and formal educational attainments achieved by the migrants in the country of origin. This was validation in its strict sense, according to the five steps process defined by the Guidelines presented in the introduction. Here, aims of validation are summative, envisaging the achievement through VPL of a total or partial “evidence based” certification of learning outcomes, without passing a formal examination. Yet validation may also be formative, when VPL is a means of access to further education and Higher Education, with exemptions through the delivery of a certain number of ECTS.

The first method has been considered by looking at the experience of the immigrant women within the case study. These women undertook a validation process to obtain a locally recognised certificate, which was sometimes a certificate at a lower level than the original diplomas awarded to them in their home countries, just so they could develop career opportunities in their new country. We also focused on the *Valform* procedure, the first of its kind piloted in Switzerland. This was set up by the Department of Education, Culture and Sports of the Canton of Valais, which we adopted as an example of validation applied to an IVET qualification. This procedure combines validation and preparatory training, with the aim of enabling experienced adults to obtain IVET qualifications in eleven professional fields. Equally, we also considered the procedure for achieving the Federal certificate of adult trainer, as an example of validation applied to a Tertiary B (PET) pathway. The third case study considered the pilot experience promoted by Geneva University in order to facilitate access to Higher Education through the delivery of exemptions and credits. This case study took into account a diverse group who were already undergoing the type of formal assessment of prior learning in which summative VPL enables learners to spend their competences to enter a formal education pathway, and upgrade their qualification.

Summative VPL seems to be an effective way to make prior learning visible, recognisable and institutionally validated. Counter-intuitively, for many people who have already received a higher education qualification in their countries of origin, using VPL to obtain local institutional recognition of their competences is desirable, even if the valuation is at a lower level than the qualification acquired in their home country. This is because this practice seems to speed up the social recognition of their qualifications. Achieving a local

IVET certificate makes Higher Education qualifications and experiential competences gained abroad more valuable on the job market in the new country than just recognising the original qualification as be recognised as (theoretically) equivalent. The preparation of a personal dossier plays at the same time an important formative function, making the candidates aware of how their knowledge, skills and attitudes, acquired in formal education and developed in experiential settings, can be directly related to a Swiss certificate or diploma; they have to defend their dossier in front of a jury composed by professionals, required to assess and recognise prior learning, and this helps to foster self-confidence and awareness of one's own competences.

### **Learners' Experiences: access routes to VPL**

Access to VPL can be promoted most effectively by transparent and useful information and anyone attempting to access VPL may benefit from support from advisors.

Nevertheless, certain personal attributes are required. First of all, the decision to undertake a validation procedure is generally based on strong individual motivations. Talking about the women interviewed during the study, integration in the host country is often seen as a "challenge", and the need for recognition arises from the will to create a professional identity, often developed in the country of origin, then visible and valued in the hosting one, despite the initial hurdles and institutional constraints. Luise graduated in Letters – a Bachelors degree in Language and Literature - in Peru and was engaged as a maid by the family of a diplomat in Geneva. Luise witnesses the relevance of both a resilient and a pragmatic approach: *"We will say that I am also quite stubborn... at first I hated my job, but I worked ... and I gave the best of me ... people were happy ... but once again I thought... what is this job? ... but I resisted, I waited two years ... and now I give Spanish classes in private schools."*<sup>10</sup>

The importance of a person's migration background becomes apparent when helping migrant women to access the Swiss labour market; this space is not always easily accessible to persons reaching the country without a work permit. Migrant women have to learn to search for alternative strategies, in order to reinvest their competences and skills. This was the case for Annika, a young woman from Romania. Despite her young age, she already lived through several migration experiences to "escape" a difficult life situation, while developing a spirit of adaptation and an impressive capacity to accept challenging goals. At *"...17 years old, I went to Spain ... but I didn't know a single word of Spanish. I was hosted by an aunt ... I found a job and I started working. I have always worked in the hotel and during the holidays I met a Swiss boy and it is thanks to him that I am in Switzerland. Once arrived in Switzerland it was very difficult to find a job ... so I started to work in a vineyard in order to have a work permit"*.<sup>11</sup> Flexibility remains

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10 « *On va dire que moi je suis aussi assez têtue, au début je détestais mon travail, mais je travaillais... et je donnais le mieux de moi... les personnes étaient contentes...mais dès fois je me disais.. qu'est-ce que c'est ce travail?... mais je supportais, je supportais pour attendre les deux ans... et maintenant je donne des cours d'espagnol dans des écoles privées »*

11 « *à 17 ans je suis partie en Espagne... mais je ne connaissais pas la langue espagnole. J'ai été accueillie chez une tante... j'ai trouvé un travail et j'ai commencé à travailler. J'ai toujours travaillé dans l'hôtellerie et*

necessary because individual action plans are often subject to changes and adaptations, according to the opportunities that are, in reality, provided by the job market. Equally, migrants must navigate constraints imposed by institutions and prerequisites imposed by written and informal norms regulating the job market and the access to formal qualifications. Migratory experience fosters motivation, and at the same time enhances the individual's capability to cope with difficulties in a realistic way, even accepting hard conditions. The balance between humility and ambition also plays an important role, because focusing with determination on a clear objective, linked to the achievement of a personal and social recognition, is fundamental: *"...after all, the years were passing by, my personal need of gaining some responsibilities at the workplace was growing and my will to progress never wavered (...) undertaking a VPL path in Switzerland allowed me to gain the respect and recognition of the nurses with whom I was working, achieving a qualification that does not exist in France"* (narrative of Sandrine, included in the Valida association study, November 2013, page 10).

Cultivating the desire to undertake a VPL process is the key trigger and is probably best found in the personal capacity to maintain pragmatism and be proactive while looking for opportunities. Sara graduated in Clinical Psychology in Argentina. Her socio-professional integration clearly underscores the importance of such an attitude, and shows us how the phases of a validation procedure are far from linear. To move through these phases requires external support, so that obstacles can be overcome one by one as they emerge. Sara said: *"First I contacted my uncle and a friend of my mother. Then I kept in touch with "Pluriel" in Geneva. I could do a consultation for free. There they helped me to complete some tasks, such as writing a letter for job applications as well as preparing for the recognition of my Diploma in Bern. A coach of "Pluriel" supported me throughout the whole process of recognition. My aunt had already prepared me for some things, given my difficulty in writing in French. Then I went to "Pluriel", in order to improve my research, and I saw 3 people [ advisors for guidance ]: one told me that I could go and teach Spanish in schools, while another told me that I had to do courses to improve my French. Another, who helped me write my CV, saw me looking one day for institutions that care for disabled people (I was considering this because my mother had worked in one of these institutions); he told me that in Geneva there was no work in that sector but I felt he was telling me about all of Switzerland. However, then he said, "...unless you want to go to Lausanne" and I saw that it was half an hour by train. And then: of course! It was at this time he told me he knew someone who worked in an institution for the disabled. M. could contact him immediately ... They looked on the internet, got the address and there was an open day. The contact person said she could go to the open door and she could receive her file. That was after about 4 months."*<sup>12</sup>

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*pendant la période des vacances j'ai connu un garçon suisse et c'est grâce à lui que je suis en Suisse. Arrivée en Suisse ça été très difficile de trouver un travail... alors j'ai commencé à travailler à la Vigne pour pouvoir avoir un permis de travail »*

12 *« d'abord j'ai pris contact avec mon oncle et avec une connaissance de ma mère. Ensuite avec Pluriel à Genève. J'ai pu faire une consultation gratuite. Là ils m'ont aidé à concrétiser certaines choses comme la lettre pour les démarches professionnelles et la demande de la reconnaissance de mon diplôme à Berne.*

Sara's narrative shows that proactive behaviours can help a lot. At the same time it provides us with a realistic picture of the links between different kinds of support that people activate to achieve their goals. They move constantly between personal proximal relationships and professional advice, in order to gain information, concrete help and confidence. Access to VPL is always a matter of personal motivation and relational networks.

There is a strong and direct relationship between the appeal of summative VPL and the social value of certification for a specific context. In Switzerland this value is strictly linked to the possession of locally recognised diploma and certificates: in other words, to be recognised as a professional, you must show certificates that have been issued according to local rules and by institutions accredited in the country. Validation can be seen as an alternative route to achieve a locally recognised qualification; it can overcome constraints and barriers hampering the recognition of a foreign diploma. This was the experience of some of the interviewed women who wanted to practise the profession for which they were educated. The road to that goal is quite complicated and difficult and Jennifer's story exemplifies this. Jennifer was a Chilean graduate in dental medicine: "...if you do not have the Swiss diploma, you must repeat the last 3 years of your training ... normally you should have the answer in August because classes start in September. It was really a mess, this recognition of my degree! I got the answer ... I had not been accepted at the course...just 3 days before the course starts! ... they said this year we have no free places, and so sorry for the delay of this answer ... now it was really hard because I could not work ... ".<sup>13</sup> In such a situation, VPL can represent a real opportunity to avoid the repetition of a complete cycle of training and to shorten the formal education path needed for gaining a Swiss diploma.

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*Une personne de Pluriel m'a soutenue pour toute la démarche de reconnaissance des diplômes. C'est ma tante qui m'avait déjà préparé certaines choses, étant donné ma difficulté à écrire en français. Ensuite à Pluriel j'y suis allée pour la recherche et j'ai vu 3 personnes [conseillers pour l'orientation] : un m'a dit que je pouvais aller enseigner l'espagnol dans les écoles, un autre m'a dit que je devais faire des cours pour améliorer mon français et une autre, qui m'a aidée à faire le cv, un jour m'a vue en train de regarder les institutions pour personnes handicapées (car ma mère avait travaillé dans une de ces institutions) et m'a dit qu'à Genève il n'y avait pas de travail. Mais j'avais l'impression qu'elle me parlait de toute la Suisse, lorsqu'il m'a dit « sauf si vous voulez aller à Lausanne », alors j'ai vu que c'était une demi-heure en train. Et alors, bien sûr ! C'est à ce moment-là qu'il m'a dit qu'il connaissait quelqu'un qui travaillait dans une institution pour handicapés. Mme M. pouvait le contacter tout de suite... Ils ont regardé sur internet, vu l'adresse et qu'il y avait une journée portes ouvertes. La personne de contact a dit qu'elle pouvait aller à la journée porte ouvertes et qu'elle pouvait recevoir son dossier. Ça c'était après 4 mois environ. »*

- 13 « Si tu n'as pas le diplôme Suisse il faut refaire les 3 derniers années... normalement on doit avoir la réponse en août parce que les cours commencent en septembre. C'était le « bordel » la reconnaissance du diplôme, j'ai eu la réponse... que je n'avais pas été admise... 3 jours avant le début des cours... ils m'ont dit cet année on aurait pas la place... excusez-nous pour le retard... en ce moment c'était vraiment dure parce que je ne pouvais pas travailler... »





VPL means the achievement of social and institutional recognition of prior learning, both formal and informal, envisaging different scopes and aims. Indeed, VPL is more than mere recognition of an equivalent educational level, but a real learning process that often includes the need to update our knowledge, skills and competences with additional training. For many of the migrant women, even if already well educated, validation of learning has been a formative process in itself, implying guidance, accompaniment, acquisition of an enhanced familiarity with a new learning environment. It is no surprise, therefore, that training and guidance providers - and NGOs - play a central role in the growth of demand and support for women discovering the various available paths to improve their social and professional integration in Switzerland. In addition, migrants should not be left alone when they have to decide, and start the integration process: the support of coaches during procedures is often necessary to support mastery of a local language or understanding of the new country's culture. Institutional but also private relational networks are fundamental; in the study, interviews show the importance of good family support for making sustainable process, especially when it is given by family members who have already integrated themselves as professionals into the new country; this was often the case interviewed women with husbands. Access to information is also very important, since the majority of the women discovered the institutions dealing with VPL through newspapers, and even more frequently by surfing the internet. Mediators are needed, and the study shows that in many cases these mediators are not professionals, but relatives, friends, community leaders and volunteers. Access to VPL seems to be managed along informal processes, building up self-confidence step by step.

### **Processes, Outcomes, Successes, Difficulties**

If we take in account recurrent words and concepts used by the interviewees, *reflective* and *formative* modes of VPL seem to present clearly in narratives. "*Reconnaissance* (recognition)" is the most relevant iteration (fig.3), followed by *développement* (personal development), *sens* (something making sense) and *confiance* (confidence). Words reminding us of typical outcomes related to *summative* VPL modes clearly emerge when recognition processes addressing institutional goals (access to certification or credits) are combined with validation. The study shows how assessment and validation of skills and competences can play a very important role because beyond any concrete outcome of the process, first of all VPL helps qualified migrant women gain a good awareness of their own know-how and capabilities. Without such awareness, because the women often question their own know-how and capabilities, marginalisation from the local job market can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. From one side VPL enables qualified migrant women to feel recognized by the society and to gain some visibility and dignity in the hosting country, and from the other side it enhances their self-confidence and even their pride.

Access to higher education is often the first step towards social recognition and allows the realisation of a dream, which is to practise the profession for which one has been qualified in the country of origin. In addition, we should not forget that many of the

interviewees highlighted that their experiences of VPL had enabled many of them to discover new ways of learn. They also said they had been enabled to enlarge their social network by meeting people with similar life paths, but at different stages of their validation path. This was particularly underscored by women who participated in collective procedures, for instance being coached and accompanied by *Découvrir* or by ECAP, in the framework of EFIS and WWW Projects.

Far from being an individualistic exercise, VPL appears to enhance social, peer and cooperative learning mechanisms. Sharing a VPL path means encountering people and contributing to exchanges to gain new insights and perspectives. A friendly colleague, involved in the same path, can represent a kind of positive role model to follow, providing examples of success or simply acting as a reference point to help capture the right information or give informal advice.

Fig.3 – Overview of VPL targets and results emerging from narratives (key words)



Despite the positive engagement in VPL, interviewed women also faced a number of challenges. These difficulties sometimes revealed the relevance of misunderstandings related to intercultural dynamics and pitfalls. Indeed, the social, educational and labour market systems often differ from one country to another, which makes an adjustment phase necessary so that the migrant can gain understanding of the hosting country's policies and learning cultures. Also the length and complexity of procedures may discourage candidates when expectations are too high and facts do not meet

expectations. In addition, information does not always seem to be accessible for everyone: diverse formative and professional backgrounds make advice and guidance in the preliminary stage of access to VPL absolutely fundamental.

The study confirms the relevance of providing individual and collective coaching, taking into account differences and helping people find the right mode and the right target for recognising, validating and finally making their learning visible and valuable. Accompaniment ensures trust and it encourages women to overcome barriers and to continue the process, despite its challenging complexity. This complexity arises both at conceptual and practical levels. Participants are expected to self-evaluate their experiences, eliciting and formalising knowledge, skills and competences, when preparing a validation dossier against any standard. Moreover, participants are expected to know how to transform events in sources and evidence of competences, highlighting the skills acquired from experience. The life stories collected by our research demonstrate how difficult this can be, especially when people are trying to formalise achievements in a different language, using different conventions to identify knowledge and skills. Equally, Swiss natives face similar challenges when they move from one linguistic area to another. Silvia, a teacher who qualified in Ticino undertook VPL in order to enter Geneva University, and she remembered that lack of acquaintance with local traditional methods of training, education and assessment meant that this exercise was not easy. *"The evaluation was not easy ... because on one side you had to recall the language. At that time it was years since I had spoken French. It is true that when I was young we studied a lot of French, when now we mainly study English ... Luckily I had good linguistic basis. So at the beginning of the process there was this concern related to language ... After that, the challenge was to deal with the dossier, the need to understand the codes to be used in a VAE process... I had to acquire the language, what they were really asking me for and the way to fill in the dossier and the subsequent difficulty in relating my experiences... in a first phase I collected all certificates, because everything you include must be supported by concrete evidence (...), the other difficult aspect was to identify and describe skills which could enable me to obtain ECTS credits for one or another course. Frankly it's something that destabilised me to a great extent ... because in my culture of a "working class" family, I have always been asked to do things and been evaluated by others. In my mind, study was attending courses, studying the books and doing the final exam.... "* <sup>14</sup>

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14 *l'évaluation n'a pas était facile...parce que d'un côté il fallait récupérer la langue, à l'époque ça faisait depuis des années que je ne parlais plus en français, il est vrai que quand j'étais jeune on étudiait beaucoup plus le français, maintenant on étudie surtout l'anglais... Heureusement j'avais des bonnes bases linguistiques. Donc au début de la démarche il y avait ce souci lié à la langue... Après il y avait un problème lié au langage du dossier... Je devais acquérir le langage VAE, c'était ce que ils me demandaient et comment je devais l'exposer dans le dossier. Et la difficulté ultérieure c'était de raconter mes expériences: dans une première phase j'ai recueilli tous les certificats, parce que tout ton parcours doit être soutenu par des épreuves concrètes .... (...), l'autre aspect difficile a était celui de devoir formuler des compétences qui pouvaient me permettre d'obtenir des crédits ECTS, pour l'un ou l' autre cours. Franchement il s'agit d'une chose qui ma déstabilisé d'une manière particulière... Parce que dans ma culture " ouvrière " j'ai toujours*

Support and coaching are a unique resource for helping people to reconstruct their life course, particularly in terms of comparing and valuing competences against a standard. Accompaniment does not mean replacing the person; it means helping him or her to prepare a portfolio in a consistent and truthful manner and in an appropriate language. Additionally, accompaniment plays a key role in supporting candidates to cope with evaluations made by experts. These are often a source of stress, given that the candidate must be able to defend in front of a jury the arguments made in his/her portfolio. In general, the less that face to face support is available implies the need for more individual prerequisites, such as perseverance and determination to overcome obstacles.

Summing up, outcomes of VPL as they emerge from narratives are found at both the individual, personal level, and at societal one. The two dimensions are strongly linked, as far as social and institutional recognition leads individuals to gain greater awareness, reinforced self-esteem, enhanced dignity, pride and visibility. VPL produces tangible and intangible outcomes at different levels, strictly related to modes and targets of the process. This may include the issuing of credits or certificates of diploma as a concrete result, and these are clearly appreciated by the learners. Yet there are many bi-products which have also come to the fore in the research narratives, defining less tangible but equally valued outcomes: assessment - in other words being recognized by a third party - seems to be not only a means for validating prior learning, but a means for building up awareness and self-confidence. At the same time VPL is a way of convincing many interviewed women that they are able to put dreams into practice, to gain new personal skills (learning to learn), to reinforce – according to Putnam (2000) - their *bonding* and above all *bridging* social capital.

### **Opportunities and threats in the development of VPL**

The Swiss multi-target approach to VPL, exemplified by narratives, deserves positive attention, as it suggests several strengths. Firstly, it makes reference to a comprehensive, overarching, model, funded in theory but at the same time having clear legal basis. It is multi-dimensional in the sense that the results can be used in different ways. VPL is actually a way to validate prior learning to claim certification in a growing number of IVET qualifications and in some higher VET paths. VPL is also a means for gaining credits for those on a higher education pathway, at least in some faculties in the French speaking regions of Switzerland; other academic institutions are experimenting with similar processes. VPL, however, is practised by many people and groups as a means to become aware of their own skills, to design and implement personal development plans (empowerment) but also to enrich the educational path with additional modules and enter further formal training. In any case, according to the women who were interviewed, VPL always seems to lead to concrete results for the person, at the professional level and in regard to personal development.

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*été habitué à faire les choses et être évalué par les autres. Au but des comptes étudier pour moi représente fréquenter les cours, étudier sur les livres et faire l'examen final...."*

VPL implies support. Although there have been institutional efforts in recent years to develop supportive agencies and professionalisation pathways for counsellors, advisers and assessors (Salini, Bednarz 2010), alongside the rich presence of professional bodies offering guidance and advice, life stories collected by interviewing migrant women highlight the relevance of informal approaches and actors. In most of the cases VPL applicants found informal rather than formal support: this was provided by family members, community leaders, friends and colleagues, NGOs and volunteers.

After more or less 20 years of grass-root initiatives, which created the common ground for developing and testing methods and tools, assessment procedures are affordable and reliable, and they respect the views of learners. Moreover, assessment processes seem to assume a double function: summative, related to the issuing of an appreciated certificate, but also formative, enriching the cultural background of the learners. VPL is strictly linked to education, presenting in contemporary contexts and narratives as words and concepts reminiscent of formal, non-formal and informal learning settings.

Among the weaknesses a certain rigidity comes to the fore, mainly derived from limiting recognition to approach to whole qualifications, rather than recognising partial qualifications for a limited time in order to achieve a whole qualification. The complexity and length of procedures, at least in considering summative VPL, are elements of discouragement that often cause the withdrawal of candidates, especially when coaching and preliminary guidance are absent. The procedure requires a certain mastery and knowledge of the local language, and a good capability of understanding VPL logics, which is not always the case, especially in regard to migrant women who have just moved to the hosting country. The implementation of procedures and visibility is very limited, and the accessibility of information is sometimes difficult. With the exception of pioneer Cantons, such Valais and Geneva, who have developed VPL practices since the last century, information is often kept deliberately scarce, in order to avoid disillusion and failure, given the case that the whole educational system is far from being ready to embark on such a revolution in learning mode.

In the future, cantonal authorities, social partners, and Higher Education institutions are expected to be more open, and they should try to make people more sensitive to validation procedures by expanding the implementation of VPL practices at the institutional level, while ensuring multidimensional and multi-target perspectives, and by doing so, merging bottom-up and top-down approaches. Arrangements should be more flexible, in order to facilitate the penetration of VPL into the workplace. VPL should no longer be regarded as a Utopian alternative to IVET and post-graduate vocational education and training, in order to achieve a certificate or a diploma, but rather as an attempt to integrate different modes and settings of learning into lifelong learning.

Quality assurance will be a critical element within the process. To what extent could we push quality assurance measures and criteria forward, to enhance the rigidity of

procedures? Two requirements underpin the design of a good and sustainable quality assurance: the requirement to safeguard the balance between reliability and affordability of assessment processes and the requirement to make the process work practically, in terms of time, space and money. Complex, burdensome procedures and very demanding personal pre-requisites could also demotivate VPL potential users, pushing them to prefer the road of traditional, redundant but safe, training pathways to VPL.

### **Final remarks**

Lessons learned from the Swiss case studies are generally consistent with hints and remarks emerging from the debate opened about the revision of the European Guidelines, drawn by the CEDEFOP during the last decade.

First of all the study shows how personal requirements and strong motivations are at the basis of the decision of undertaking a VPL process. In the case of migrant women – often improperly regarded as a group as disadvantaged learners – these requirements differ from one case to another. As far as the narratives indicate, women choosing VPL are the strongest component. Triggers such as pride (wishing to claim social recognition, dignity and voice), the will to pursue social and professional integration in the host country, stimulating “challenge”, as well as the need to gain a compulsory certification to reinforce their employability, always play key roles. At the same time, certain attitudes are needed: a pragmatic approach, looking for concrete opportunities, the capability of designing and implementing flexible action plans, even narrative and communicative attitudes, because narration is a fundamental means to develop a VPL process. Strong pre-requisites, sometimes also regarded as outcomes of VPL, seem to be at the basis of the process; these include sufficient self-esteem (leverage effect), commitment (inner motivations), curiosity and open mind, acceptance of an external assessment, a positive relationship with formal learning and education.

Some strengths can be identified in the Swiss experience of VPL, as it emerges from the case studies:

- A secure legal basis
- Multidimensional approach, linking top-down to bottom-up
- Accompaniment and coaching in the preparatory phases, mostly informal, ensured by non-professionals, but also formal
- Affordable and reliable assessment procedures
- Formative approach
- Last but not least: focus on personal and social outcomes

Conversely, weaknesses can be considered in order to define a strategy of improvement, providing suggestions that may apply more widely. The weaknesses are mostly linked to the implementation of practices, and to the policy level:

- Rigidity and lack of a stable recognition of units of learning (validation addressing a whole qualification or nothing)
- Complexity of the procedures

- High level pre-requisites (personal skills and mastery of local languages, hampering migrants from embarking on the VPL process)
- Lack of information and action, despite structured procedures advocated within the National Guidelines

In general, in Switzerland as well as at EU level, we have the impression that a first phase of development of VPL practices was concluded by the approval of legal basis and comprehensive guidelines regulating the sector. VPL has been legitimated but its implementation is still poor in comparison with debate and legal frames (see Voit, Petrini, Salini, 2012). Goals and outcomes differ from one institution to another. NGOs and innovative training bodies are trying to generate the demand and to recruit atypical learners belonging to hidden target groups, advocating VPL to give people a chance. As indicated, this presents some difficulties, because VPL proves to be more useful as a means to further empower elements of the learner population who are already relatively strong. More prudently, Higher Education Institutions adopt VPL in order to enlarge recruitment, so it is developed as a marketing action. Nevertheless, results seem to be less than expected because of other limiting factors. The cost-to-benefit ratio of VPL remains uncertain, if the wider considerations are not taken into account, such as indirect costs and benefits of lifelong learning.

Looking at the future, opportunities can be found at different levels:

- Growing sensitivity and institutional engagement
- Promotion: we should make validation more visible!
- Make implementation strategies multidimensional and more flexible
- Value VPL as a component of a lifelong learning perspective (integration between formal and informal learning)
- Develop methodological and didactical innovation, in adult education

Conversely, there are risks and constraints:

- Rigid quality assurance rubrics (considering VPL only as a means for achieving a formal qualification, focusing only on assessment processes), hampering the legitimation of multidimensional and multi-target approaches to VPL
- Artificial opposition between VPL and continuous vocational training
- Complexity of procedures discouraging learners (traditional paths conceived as easier)
- Overloading pre-requirements
- Marginality of VPL in the political debate

Evaluation and monitoring are needed. Equally, the closure of a place for mutual learning and exchange - Platform VA at the federal level - can be considered a negative result. During the next years efforts should be focusing on three macro-level goals, which can be considered very close to EU-level goals:

### **1) Promoting access to VPL**

- Ensuring a good balance between demand and supply steered processes

- Supporting NGOs as fundamental players in animating the demand and promoting VPL – differentiated strategies, consistent with diverse target groups (community leaders, advisers, mentors, coaches...)
- Enhancing the relational dimension of VPL
- Focusing on multidimensional triggers and life cycles
- Developing open access to information (multichannel)
- Pursuing the integration between VPL, formal learning and work experiences

## **2) Make VPL processes easier, understandable and more user friendly**

- Coping with misunderstandings; in relation to migrants, these may arise from intercultural dynamics, lack of socialisation in the hosting country, limited networks...
- Ensuring guidance in the preliminary phase, by linking informal and formal support: the first steps are the most important!
- Coping with complexity of procedures (formative approach to VPL, as a means to learn, rather than an assessment game):
  - Facilitate the self-recognition of competences and skills,
  - Reduce language and conceptual barriers (value practical approaches)!
  - Coaching in the preparation of a dossier or Portfolio

## **3) Professionalise VPL practitioners (at any level)**

- Making teachers and trainers familiar with VPL as a means to individualise learning, foster experiential and reflective learning, innovate competence development processes (avoiding contrapositions, in which VPL may be conceived as a threat by formal education)
- Developing a comprehensive approach to VPL, integrating coaching and accompaniment, assessment processes, engineering of VPL, in order to enable professionals to reason from a global perspective, rather than adopting fragmented phases and rubrics)
- Addressing, beyond specialists, practitioners playing a fundamental role in informal networks, such as community leaders or union learning representatives, who can facilitate access to lifelong learning and guide learners towards undertaking VPL.

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### Personal Perspectives on Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) in the Context of Finnish Higher Education

Aino Lepänjuuri and Eila Burns

#### Abstract

This article describes an individual case story of a non-traditional mature (over 50 years) higher education (HE) student with a learning difficulty on his journey to have his skills and competencies recognised in Finnish HE. The process of validation of prior learning (VPL) in the Finnish HE context will be explained and some recommendations based on personal views will be suggested in order to ease and enhance life-long learning opportunities for all learners. Students' individual pro-activeness as well as guidance discussions and inclusive pedagogical practices seem to be key for a successful VPL process for non-traditional learners in Finnish HE.

#### Aspects of the Finnish VPL context

Over the last decade VPL has been a widely discussed topic in Finnish tertiary education as well as in working life. Similar debates can be seen emerging in other countries as labour markets change across the continent demanding individuals to update and develop their competences several times during their careers. The individual with their personal needs, learning aims and acquired skills are at the centre of the discussion although surrounded by stakeholders' (e.g. educational institutions, employers) interests and aims.

The Finnish VPL system is connected to the European level development of HE as well as national higher educational initiatives and projects. In developing VPL the aim has been to identify national and international best practices to recognise prior learning, create common principles and processes to be used in the recognition and validation of prior learning in higher education institutions (HEIs). A number of concepts have been and remain commonly used, to refer to VPL. In Finland terms such as OSTU (Osaamisen Tunnistaminen) and AHOT (Aiemmin Hankitun Osaamisen Tunnistaminen) are used while in international context terms such as APL, APEL, RPL, PLAR are often utilized depending on the context or country. However, these terms are not always fully interchangeable as the different emphasis within them may vary. VPL includes practices that enable utilisation of competences acquired elsewhere than in formal education and smoother acceptance and recognition of studies completed in another educational organisation

relating to HE studies. The recognition of prior learning acquired in other settings than official education is referred to as 'validation' within the European Union (Colardyn & Bjornåvold, 2005).

In Finnish HE organisations students can take competence assessment if they think some of their prior learning could be validated. Students are at the centre of, and are the initiators of the process although support is given by HE institutions. Particularly, in the modern information society it is beneficial to help students to identify, assess and get recognition and validation (educational credits, work experience or professional certifications) of their prior learning and achievements. The VPL process develops not only students' abilities to describe, assess and document their own competences, but also HE institutions' understanding of knowledge creation and its dissemination. Valuing learning and competences is the key message of VPL in Finland. This understanding is based on the concept of lifelong and life-wide learning, which expands learning to all ages and all areas of life. Learning is not only limited to inside the walls of educational institutions but rather can take place anywhere and in all walks of life. Whether we talk about formal, informal (work experiences, non-profit workplace courses), or even non-formal learning (hobbies, voluntary work, unpaid work or other life experiences) individuals entering higher education should have the opportunity for recognition and validation of relevant skills and competences they have acquired elsewhere. Recognition and validation of prior learning enhances the efficiency within the educational system on one hand and individual's motivation and employment prospects on the other. Finnish educational legislation enables the recognition and validation of prior learning that has taken place outside traditional educational settings. However, practical implementation and the impact of VPL vary (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2011).

In Finland VPL practices exist within educational institutions i.e. schools, colleges and higher education institutions. Each institution determines how VPL practices are implemented and who is responsible for them. Staff members (e.g. lecturers, study counsellors or heads of programmes) who are responsible for VPL are required to have sufficient expertise and competences which are typically acquired during formal teacher training. Overall, VPL with its objectives and opportunities, is fairly well known amongst education professionals in Finland. However, recognition and validation of competences acquired in work or informal learning contexts and their assessment in connection to criteria set for study programmes have posed new challenges. It has been recognised that learning and competences acquired outside the formal educational system has often been considered invisible and therefore cannot be validated and used as part of HE studies.

Amongst the latest developments and initiatives concerning VPL in Finnish HE has been understanding work as an element of the learning process. Recognising work as part of the learning process entails validation of students' work experience periods during studies, providing their personal learning objectives are in accordance with the aims of

the study modules and agreed between the student and tutor. Despite this seemingly advantageous development contradictory views exist. Typically students see work as a way to gain new experiences and as a means of supporting their financial situation, whereas HE institutions may view it as prolonging studies, and entailing extra work for educational professionals. The challenge is to view work experience as a positive phenomenon that truly enhances students' competences. (Duunista opintopisteiksi, Opas työn opinnollistamisesta 2013).

The other latest initiative concerns external evaluation of VPL practices in all Finnish HE organisations. The evaluation was completed in 2013 and was accomplished by a group of external evaluators who assessed the entire VPL system in HE organisations from a holistic perspective. General aims and objectives of VPL as well as practical implementation, taking into account students, academics and administration staff members' points of view, were part of the evaluation. (AHOT-korkeakouluissa –hanke, Tunnista osaaminen 2013). One of the main recommendations brought up from the external evaluation was that VPL processes should be incorporated into a number of areas when planning and developing HE. These areas should include, for example:

- Planning tuition and curricula
- Student guidance and support systems
- International strategy and operations
- Cooperation with labour market stakeholders
- Thesis tutoring
- Development of language tuition
- Administration of the adult education system as a whole

### **Practical implementation of VPL in Finnish HE**

In Finnish HE organisations VPL processes underpin the idea that not only the learning experience itself but the outcomes, application and reflection of prior learning to professional life are even more important. The process of recognition is based on comparing the existing knowledge and skills against the requirements of the curriculum or study programme. In other words, the focus is on competence gained through these experiences, not just the experiences themselves. Competence demonstrates whether the student is able to perform adequately. The student has to be able to handle relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes in different and changing situations. The process of VPL includes three phases: identification (mapping out the relevant competences), assessment, and validation of competences (which then will be certified). Different methods and processes are being developed for each of these phases in order to streamline VPL.

HE institutions have the responsibility to clearly define the learning aims of study programmes and principles of VPL, as well as communicating them to students. The VPL process starts with the recognition and assessment of the learner's skills and competences. If competences are relevant and recognised they will be validated in full or in part, typically by awarding study credits. In the case of a negative decision, the HE

institution is required to explain the reasons for rejection to the student, who then has the right to appeal within a specific timeframe.

As recognition and validation of prior learning is based upon the idea that competences and skills are important, not where or how they have been acquired, it is beneficial for all parties; students, HE organisations, and labour markets. However, VPL is not a shortcut to complete HE studies with minimal input, rather it is way to demonstrate true skills and competences that can be proved by practices set by the HE organisation. It also gives the student an opportunity to widen their competence areas as it discourages enrolling to already familiar and too easy study modules.

**Table 1.** Benefits of VPL for different stakeholders

| <b>Student</b>   | <b>Higher Education Organisation</b>                                   | <b>Labour market</b>  |
|--|--|---|
| Supports individual learning process                                     | Saves resources when it is not necessary to study same topics again    | Enhances cooperation between labour market and higher education organisations       |
| Increases motivation when it is not necessary to study same topics again | Enhances cooperation both in and outside of the HE organisation        | Connects work and studies<br><br>Increases competencies and skills required at work |
| Shortens study time  | Eases and expedites graduation process<br><br>Increases student intake | Valuates and validates work experience  |
| Supports international mobility  | Improves international mobility and skills                             | Increases awareness of skills and competences acquired at HE                        |
| Increases awareness of individual skills and competences                 | Increases competitiveness and quality awareness                        | Increases understanding of VPL and competences                                      |

At the national level in Finland, committees have been set up to promote and disseminate best practices of VPL, and to make recommendations for these to be used. Such guidelines are specified in cooperation with different fields of study between educational institutions. HE institutions must have a uniform, reliable and transparent system for recognising prior learning. The recognition system must be developed as a part of curricula development, teaching and guidance, evaluation and quality assurance (Opetusministeriö 2004, 2007). Students' VPL applications should be evaluated in accordance with the quality control criteria of the institution. This emphasises continuous training of different VPL stakeholders in order for them to be aware of the

latest criteria set and practices to be adhered to. Students should also be regularly informed about practices to be employed. Although, in principle, VPL values all kinds of learning, one of the main challenges for it is that not all study programmes are fully competence-based. Thus, applicants' competences gained in work are difficult to recognise and validate. So in practice, despite good initiatives, previous study certificates are still the principal way of identifying competences in HE.

### **How can I get my skills and competences recognised in HE?**

This part moves on to analyse the Finnish case studies, first in general and then through one case in more detail. The cases were used in order to explore and exemplify a learner-centered approach in VPL paying particular attention to under-represented groups and non-traditional learners in HE. The Finnish case studies consisted of 15 individuals of which seven represented the learners in the 50+ age group and eight of those having learning difficulties, who in this article are called learners with special educational needs (SEN). These 15 individuals represented different parts of the country, different subject areas and different stages of studies. In addition their employment histories were widely varied. The main aim of focusing on these case studies was to discover the practical implementations of VPL, the main challenges they have faced during the VPL process in HE, and means of support offered by HE institutions to SEN and 50+ learners.

Both groups of students (SEN and 50+), although under represented, are part of the modern student population in Finnish HE. It has very recently been discovered that five percent of students in Finnish HE have some form of learning difficulty or disability. Most common learning difficulty among the students in HE has been found to be dyslexia (74%) (Kunttu & Pesonen, 2012). Learners in the 50 + group have their individual educational, working life and life histories as well as learning interests. They also differ in terms of their own initiative, motivation, self-confidence and abilities. What unifies them, however, is their long life experience with its ups and downs. For this group life-long learning can appear as an opportunity, necessity or challenge depending on the individual situation.

We believe that focusing on one case offers an interesting micro-context in which to explore the VPL process and challenges associated with it in more detail. We chose one particular case because he represented both target groups, 50 + and SEN, and had to a certain extent a confusing but interesting VPL process. He had already become aware of his difficulties with reading and writing at an early age in comprehensive school, in where he was given some support but no formal diagnosis at the time. He recalls that, *“At the lower grades in school writing was like poison to me. I also found new maths really challenging.”* Fortunately he discovered early on that he was particularly skilled in manual and artisan work which he leaned towards during school years. Much later in life he was diagnosed as having dyslexia, something which he soon came to terms with and accepted as being part of his personality.

Before applying to HE he had had a long working history in the door-making industry, props construction and as a woodwork instructor in a prison and a vocational college. In

between the different jobs he had also had some periods of unemployment, which he used to attend professional training courses in order to develop his skills and to enhance his employability. It was during the time when he worked as a woodwork instructor that inspired him to pursue of career in teaching. He believed that becoming a VET teacher would further enhance his professional prospects. He cherished the idea of applying for and being accepted onto a teacher education programme in order to attain a formal VET teaching qualification and to improve his academic qualification. His subsequent application was successful but it was at this stage that his slightly confusing VPL process began.

As discussed earlier, VPL focuses particularly on the ways of acknowledging and documenting students' competences. In principle VPL can be applied at any stage of the studies but in practice students bring up the past competences that they wish to get validated at the beginning of the studies. At this stage of the VPL process, competences should be notified in students' personal learning plan (PLP) that they are required to create prior to one-to-one discussions with their tutors. During tutor discussions students are asked whether they have any special needs (for example, due to learning difficulties/disability or life circumstances) that should or need to be taken into account in relation to their studies and the VPL process. This practice appeared to be helpful for all case students, and this was especially apparent with the individual we focused on, saying, *"It is important to talk through one's own history; what I've done, which type of environments I've worked in and take it from there."*

Tutor discussions sessions usually cover the content of the study modules and identify areas where VPL could be used. If such areas are identified, students are required to demonstrate that they have acquired the necessary competences by offering evidence of prior learning. They have to be able to make prior learning visible and it is their responsibility to substantiate their skills and competences. Thus, the individual is at the very centre of the process. This poses challenges in many respects, in particular, for students to whom HE education is unknown and unfamiliar as it was with our case.

Providing evidence of the acquired competences and experiences can be challenging. The process within HE relies heavily on documentation, mainly in written form, of the prior learning. For our case this proved to be a challenging activity. He noted that *"You have to be brave and have the courage to ask. There are often fears of whether I do or say something wrong"*. In order for VPL to be effective, the evidence has to go beyond written documentations to cover, for example, discussions, recorded evidence, demonstrations, portfolio or other such means. The selection of tools and instruments used in the current VPL case took the form of practical demonstrations, collaborative group discussions and written documentation. Elements of learning that were evaluated were his work experience, positive attitude and subject-specific skills and knowledge. These were assessed against the criteria set for cooperation and interaction competence that is required in the teacher training programme. VPL in this case included awarding some study credits for his optional study modules based on recently obtained Specialist

of Competence-based Qualification. However, it did not mean exemptions from any other study modules. Instead some learning assignments were awarded based on competences he had gained based on his non-formal and informal learning. He was particularly worried about the written assignments given his dyslexia. Therefore group activities were recommended to him as he felt more comfortable when working in small learning groups ('learning circles') that were often used in part to produce study assignments. This kind of collaborative working method appeared to be useful for him as the different members of the group brought in their specific skills and complemented each other's abilities. *"We simplified and brainstormed the topics in group. I found it easier to bring forward my own thoughts to the other members of the group than writing them down on my own. We complemented and connected each other's strengths and abilities."*

Considering all the 15 cases (SEN and 50+) three important elements were noticed that appeared to be typical of the target groups. Firstly, tutors should be able to allocate enough time for personal guidance and discussions. These discussions during the studies seem to be very important in the process to map out individuals' past experiences better. Students should be helped to recognise their skills and competences as well as areas of learning that might pose challenges to them, and then offer support. Secondly, special attention should be paid to inclusive pedagogy. Teaching and learning should be student-centred and relevant to adult learners. Thirdly, the VPL process in itself should be clear and straight forward to both tutors and students. Outcome-based curricula and personal study plans with sufficient support and guidance are key to this.

## **Conclusion**

Our findings provide insights that addressing learning needs of learners in SEN and 50+ groups and applying VPL in HE can be challenging. In particular applying VPL approaches to learners in the SEN group seemed difficult. This was due, according to our SEN cases, to them having had difficulties in the past which had led to patchy educational backgrounds and employment histories. It cannot be stressed strongly enough that paying attention to guidance and inclusive pedagogical practices that value diverse ways of learning enhances everybody's learning but more so with these kinds of learners. Students with SEN may not always have a clear idea about their own learning needs and competences, and therefore discussions about individual strengths and abilities may offer a way to think of alternative ways to learn in HE. Dialogues and discussions with the tutor seem to be effective methods and, therefore, they should be used throughout the studies. This kind of approach puts students at the centre of learning and encourages them to reflect on their individual needs and competences more deeply. However, the VPL system as a whole poses great challenges for higher educational institutions, pedagogical solutions and individuals. It requires particular flexibility from educational providers at the time when resources are already scarce. It is important to develop modules into which the VPL system is incorporated and make sure that these are up-to-date in order to guarantee a high quality VPL system. Furthermore, it should

not be forgotten that the approach, idea, tools and methods of VPL are important elements in student guidance systems.

It is also useful to think about the steps of the learning process more widely. Our case describes this as follows: *“[Generally in education] it would be important to bring forward diverse types of learners and test, discuss and bring up alternative ways of learning. That is to say that teachers and students should consider together what the best way to learn is. Learning new things shouldn’t be too difficult at beginning or otherwise one might give up. Clarifying things that’s unclear, re-doing, recapping and practical application are important parts of the learning process. It would be good to gain positive experiences along the way.”*

The same principles should be applied to all students; VPL methods and procedures are likely to be as suitable for all learners as they should be for SEN and 50+ groups. The successes or failures of these two special groups can offer insights into where VPL as a whole stands.

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## Meeting points in the VPL process – a key challenge for VPL activities

# 10

*Ellen Enggaard and Kirsten Aagaard*

### **Introduction**

The right to have your competences recognized and validated as a mean to gain access to or exemptions of a higher education has existed since 2007, but the knowledge of this opportunity is still not very well spread and the potentials of the law are not exploited. This goes for individuals as well as for educational institutions, work places and other stake holders that might be active such as job centers, social partners, and 3rd sector.

In this case study we focus on the meeting points between the individual, the HE educational institutions and the labor market/the work place in a LLL context. How can the individual in his or her individual career strategies benefit from the option of VPL in the process of managing his or her career strategy? What are the main barriers and obstacles the individual might meet in his or her attempt to move on in his career whether the motivation is change of career direction, a step up the career ladder, personal development or threat of losing his job and the work place's demand for new competences?

There are three main players on this scene: the individual, the (HE) educational institution and the work place. There may be more players involved in the process, but in this case study we will focus on these three players and how they interact. How does the HE institution meet the individual and how does the work place meet the individual, how does the HE institution and the work place meet. How can the correlation between these players open up for a lifelong learning trajectory for the individual?

This article discusses some of these questions. The discussions are based on two case studies: one focusing on the meeting point between the individual and the educational institution and one focusing on the meeting point between the individual, the work place and the educational institution.

The case material in the first case study has been people with alternative careers e.g. in arts, performance, journalism, political work, NGO work and people with a solid background in 3<sup>rd</sup> sector. These people have little or no formal education, they have gained their competences in non-formal or informal environments and for different reasons (health problems, change of career, economy) they need formal education on a higher level to pursue their career route. In this category we have 6 cases/individuals.

Common to these 6 individuals is their strength and resources. In Denmark there are many alternative career routes possible due to a relative well extended subsidy system to cultural activities, NGO work, folk enlightenment etc. which makes it possible for young people to create alternative career routes and manage without formal education. These people collect a variety of experience and competences that is called for in a modern complex society: creativity, flexibility, innovative competences, project leadership, communication skills etc.

The six case individuals have all applied for access to higher education in our institution and they all need a VPL to gain access, as they do not meet the admission requirements. From these 6 cases we have picked a single case to tell a story and discuss problems, perspectives and dilemmas in the meeting point between the individual and the educational system.

The case material in the second case study is about IT workers who fear for their jobs due to the rapid development of qualifications in administrative jobs, IT, etc. Working as an IT supporter, programmer or developer is an unsecure business and the group as a whole can be expected to have a common incentive for competence development: they have their jobs in an uncertain sector; a lot of their competences are self-educated, gained in an informal or non-formal setting. Their competences are to a broad extent perishable as specialized knowledge of IT programs and functions quickly can become obsolete.

In this case study we have nine individuals, all selected from a major project, strategic competence development in an IT department in the health sector. The two groups have several challenges in common. They are not able to pursue an ordinary career path neither horizontally nor vertically. They have to construct their own career development. They need formal education to get on with their careers and they need access to or exemptions of higher education.

### **The Danish context**

This is a short introduction to the current Danish validation policy and system to contextualize the topic in this article. In Denmark meeting places between stakeholders in VPL activities are a core issue in policy, evaluations and analysis of the Danish validation system.

For 20 years there have been discussions and policy developments concerning validation in Denmark. Since 2004 there have been more substantial developments in validation processes to allow learning gained in non-formal and informal contexts to be made visible and recognized.

The key legislation from 2007<sup>15</sup> gives each individual (from 18 or 25 years depending of the educational field), the right to have his/her prior learning experiences validated in relation to specific goals of adult education and continuing training. It focuses on the needs of the individual and aims to make the process as accessible and flexible as possible. The educational institutions are responsible for conducting prior learning

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15 <https://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=25349>

assessment on the basis of the educational standards, admission requirements and competence objectives against which the candidate wishes to be evaluated. Whilst the law puts the learning institutions at the center of the VPL process other stakeholders act as guidance institutions, e.g. the job centers, the trade unions and the third sector are also involved in guidance and counselling. All in all many organizations and bodies are involved both in policymaking and in VPL practices. The background is a strong social partnership model in Denmark, involving business, trade unions and government in policymaking and review. The social partners have contributed significantly and have had influence in a number of areas within the legislation.

In 2010 The Ministry of Education made a national action plan. In spring 2011 a committee was established in order to unfold the action plan. The committee made a model for validation processes describing a coherent process of four stages: identification, documentation, assessment and certification. It illustrates how the education perspective of the candidate can be combined with a job and employment perspective. In addition, the model shows how different stakeholders can have divergent tasks through the stages of the overall process.

After identifying one or more study objectives or admission requirements against which a candidate is to be evaluated, the educational institution is responsible for the specific counseling and guidance relating to the process of prior learning assessment. Other bodies can be in charge of information, identification, guidance and counselling, in a broader perspective, in the phase leading up to the assessment process (“the pre-phase”). These include i.e. trade unions, employers’ associations, job centers, unemployment insurance funds, civic education institutions, study committees and “eVejledning” (online guidance service), who can all take care of this part of the process and often in collaboration with the educational institution.

Focus in the “pre-phase” is on establishing objectives, identifying needs, direction and wishes. Among other things, companies can do so by defining new tasks and future business plans with matching competence profiles. For individuals, both employees and jobseekers, this part of the process may include documentation of what they have previously learnt. For both companies and individuals, the pre-phase helps clarify and identify objectives and the direction for career development, and it helps create a potential plan for the types of formal education which would be relevant in future. If, in “the pre-phase”, a need for formal education is identified, and the individual candidate possesses knowledge, skills and competencies within the area concerned, without having any documentation to the fact, prior learning assessment may be relevant.

In the processes of documentation and assessment at the educational institutions, the documentation work is narrowed against the specific educational objectives and requirements. Both the candidate and the educational institution contribute to the documentation process.

There are many types of co-operation between the main stakeholders. The co-operation in Denmark can be described as a coordinated top-down and bottom-up approach. All active stakeholders wish to see more progress in relation to prior learning in Denmark. They also agree that co-operation between the main stakeholders is important in order to make progress.

In this article the focus is on the meeting points between the individual, the educational institution and the work place (enterprises) as the main challenge for a coherent VPL process.

### **The meeting point between individual and education**

*Brian is 35 years old. In the Gymnasium he spends a year in Argentina as an exchange student, and this experience turns out to be of great importance for his further course of life and career. After finishing high school he engages in – sometimes voluntary and sometimes paid - work of various kinds within NGO organizations working with development in third world countries dealing with environmental issues, poverty issues and social work. Brian also starts a small business importing applied art from Amazonas. The business doesn't really pay so he has to close it down after a couple of years.*

*Through his work in different NGOs he develops a palette of skills and competences within the areas of communication, journalism, organization, project leadership, international networking, research, intercultural communication, sustainability and more. Parallel to his voluntary work he holds various paid jobs such as translator, photographer, and receptionist. He also attends a study program at the university. However, he never graduates.*

*When he turns 33 years old he decides that it is time to get a career plan in order to get a more permanent (and paid) position on the labor market . He has settled in Denmark, he has a wife, a child, a house and obligations to support a family.*

*He gets a job as a substitute in social working, and he realizes that working with marginalized young people in Denmark resembles his experience from working with poor people in the third world. He decides that he wants to get a formal education that can increase his possibilities of permanent employment in the field of social work.*

Brian's career route up to this point may be characterized as a zigzag course driven by a great social engagement in poverty, sustainability and environment, and odd jobs on the side to scratch a bare living. But in working with marginalized young people he realizes, that he can make use of his experience and the competences he has obtained in working with poverty in the third world. He learns from his manager, that to get an employment on a permanent basis, he has to graduate a short cycled higher education in Social Education Work. He applies for a VPL at the educational institution as he doesn't formally fulfill the admission requirements.

As part of the standard procedure in applying for a VPL, Brian is invited to an interview with the student counselor. Before meeting with Brian, the counselor has studied Brian's portfolio and she decides, that a dialogue with Brian should concentrate on the potentials of his skills and competences. The counselor thus stages an interview with a formative approach and with the objective of reaching a career strategy for Brian.

### **A transformation process**

During the interview new perspectives appear for Brian. He realizes that his experiences from his NGO work, from his university studies, from his speeches and writings on various topics, from his organizational work, and from his meetings with foreign cultures – they are not just skills and competences belonging to specific isolated situations and contexts, but they might transform into an integrated new self-concept that opens for new actions and career routes. What happens in this process during the interview could be characterized as 'transformative learning'. The American professor in adult education Jack Mezirow has launched and defined this phenomenon as *"the process, where we transform those frames of reference that we take for granted to make them wider, more shrewd, open, respectful and emotionally flexible, so they may generate beliefs and convictions that will turn out to be more true or legitimate for guiding new actions"*<sup>16</sup>.

The transformation process is a learning process that so to speak rearranges Brian's self-concept. Brian realizes that he possesses academic and analytical competences and skills in communication and organization although he doesn't formally hold a grade that proves it. And he realizes that he wishes to make use of these competences. With help from the student counselor he draws up a new career strategy: he will stick to the plan of getting a formal education in the field of social work, but he now realizes that he is able to enter the education at a higher level which will make it possible for him to aim for a job as an academic employee in the field of social work, for example as a consultant or a developer in the State.

Brian and the counselor are now able to make out a career plan that implies an assessment of competences to gain access to a medium cycled diploma study that is one level higher than what he initially applied for. Furthermore the counselor estimates that he will have good chances of getting exemptions so he will be able to complete the diploma study in shorter time and go on to a master degree.

### **Guidance and counseling in the VPL process**

If the counselor and/or assessor – the person dealing with the application – performs professionally, performs a personalized career guidance and sets up a process with the applicant that is open to explore new – maybe not thought of before – opportunities and possibilities for career choices – the individual will maybe learn in the process. Brian did learn in the process – he became clear about his possibilities and was able to make a

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16 Mezirow, Jack (2005): At lære at tænke som en voksen I: Knud Illeris & Signe Berri (red): *Tekster om voksenlæring*. København: Roskilde Universitetsforlag

career choice. His different work and life experiences transform into competences that count in formal education.

When the counselor meets with the applicant, the meeting takes place in the frame and the context of the educational system. The applicant has contacted the educational institution because he has a wish for a formal certificate from the institution; he is applying for an assessment of his competences up against the formal requirements to gain access to a certain education, course or module. The counselor expects the applicant to be clarified as to what he wants and why he is here. The applicant is expected to have an intention, an aim with seeking guidance so the role of the counselor is to give the applicant information about the requirements and to assess the competences of the applicant with a *summative* approach to the process.

But in taking the clarification of the applicant for granted before she meets with him, the counselor misses a very important point: the clarification of the applicant is a process, and the applicant should be given the chance to reflect in the process to broaden his perspectives and see other and new possibilities in the clarification process, to learn in the process. So the counselor should be prepared to perform career guidance and have a *formative* approach to the process of guidance and assessment.

Professional career guidance focus on supporting people in clarifying processes aiming at identification of and developing competences and interests, to be able to make choices of importance for employability, and to pursue individual strategies for learning and education, for work and for life perspectives.

Our case study shows, that the individual will apply for a VPL from very different starting points. The target group that we investigated could be characterized as a group with many resources from their often unorthodox and creative work and life experiences. They might have far more opportunities than they can see for themselves at the moment, so it is important that the counselor is able to support the applicant in an investigating, experimenting, and reflective clarification process.

### **The assessment**

Brian has to produce further documentation for his competences in order to gain an exemption. The actual assessment of his documentation material is done by two assessors, teachers within the profession.

The approach in the assessment is a summative approach: do Brian's competences as documented in his portfolio match the formal objectives of the module or do they not. The assessors are deeply rooted in their profession and their subjects, and they are not instantly able to recognize Brian's competences and give him the exemptions. They contact the student counselor in an effort to understand the background of Brian's application and why he has been guided forward to an assessment. The counselor is able to explain to the assessors how Brian's competences can be looked upon as being equivalent to the objectives of the study module applied for and the three of them agree on granting Brian the exemptions he has applied for.

Brian and the counselor have created a context where Brian's competences can be looked upon in a different manner. This new contextualization of his competences is not visible for the professionals, the assessors, as they have a specific and narrow concept of what the outcome, the objectives of the module applied for should be. To discover the equivalence they need help from the counselor. They need to transform the competences so to speak from an input oriented understanding to an output oriented understanding, from a curriculum oriented assessment to a function oriented assessment. The assessment is part of the VPL *process* and it implies the ability and the will of the assessors to re-contextualize, to translate the formal objectives of the study into competences, to be able to discover the equivalence and perform a solid assessment. The candidate must translate his non-formal and informal learning into a language, which may be comprehensible to the educational system. And the educational system must translate their objectives and codes into a language, which makes the candidates able to document their competences.

Among professional career guidance counselors it is commonly agreed on, that guidance and assessment should be separated if possible. However, in a VPL process new insights and clarifications might arise in all phases of the process which speaks for the counselor's presence in the assessment.

In the educational system it is traditional to have the student's learning process supervised by the same person who does the assessment at the final examination, usually with an external examiner as a co-assessor. This tradition acknowledges the subjective and relative elements of an examination and it considers the student's learning process. In a VPL process the counselor plays an important role and it might be a good idea to let the counselor participate all the way including the assessment, to help the applicant crack the code of the formal knowledge and learning and to help the system crack the code of the non-formal and informal knowledge and learning. To have the counselor as one of the assessors might qualify the assessment because the contexts in which the competences appeared are brought into the context of the assessment.

The assessment is a process that moves within the span between the convergent and the divergent, between exploration and control. It is a process where the educational system and the individual meet and where both parties have to open up to learn to appreciate each other's language, crack the codes of formal, non-formal and informal learning respectably.

### **An ethical dilemma**

The counselor that meets a VPL applicant is positioned between the applicant and the educational system, and from this position she should give support to the applicant, and at the same time be a representative of the system, she has to defend or protect norms and standards of the system.

This might raise an ethical dilemma, especially if the counselor also is the one doing the actual assessment.

The right to have your competences and your informal and non-formal learning assessed implies a possibility for people to gain formal acknowledgement and recognition from the system. You will get a piece of paper that tells the world that you are just as worthy, wise and valued as the one who passed an ordinary exam. The German social philosopher Axel Honneth has in his theory on recognition<sup>17</sup> brought attention to the meaning of the societal recognition for the individual, and the implications of lack of recognition that might lead to a feeling of infringement. A guidance and assessment session with a VPL applicant contains potentially a great risk for the applicant and the counselor has to be aware of this risk and deal with it empathically and professionally. The counselor is in a double position: on the one side she has to help, support and facilitate the process of the applicant, the applicant's "fight for recognition" (Honneth 2006) and on the other side she is a representative of the interests of the society with the authority to give official recognition – or not!

### ***The meeting point between the individual, the work place, and the education***

In the first part of this article we have dealt with some of the questions and dilemmas that might arise in the meeting between the individual and the educational system in a VPL process. In this second part we will look at the meeting point between the individual, the work place and the education.

*In the first part of the project the IT department made a GAP analysis comparing the existing competences with the estimated need for IT competences according to the overall general strategic plans for the organization. A list of IT 'roles' were drawn up and translated into professional and personal competences, level 1-5. The demand for competences is in this way related to the job functions, the 'roles', and not the employees.*

*Next the competences of the employees have been rated up against one or more job 'roles' and a competence development plan were drawn out for all IT employees.*

*In the second part of the project a competence matrix was developed where all the job 'roles' were matched with courses and modules from relevant educations at different levels. The competence matrix and the individual competence development plans give altogether an overview of the need for competence development in the IT department.*

*The relevant educational institutions were contacted to participate in transforming the individual plans into concrete plans for education, involving possible assessments for access to and/or exemptions for higher education.*

*The participants in the project made a portfolio and they were matched with counselors from the relevant educational levels. Together they clarified the possibilities of the best possible career route for the employee including possible VPL exemptions or admission.*

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17 Axel Honneth (2006): Kampen om anerkendelse. København. Hans Reizels Forlag

We have chosen a large-scale strategic competence development project involving around 300 IT workers in the health care sector. The project was initiated by the union as part of their struggle to secure their members' employability by recurrent education and competence development.

Most of the staff involved in this project needs formal education at a high level within the areas of management and IT in the health systems.

Thus, the employees in this project would be expected to take great interest in a competence development project.

On the other side of the table the employers also are expected to take interest in a competence development project. There is a constant pressure on the public health care sector to provide more specialized and extensive services, to optimize procedures, and to exploit the possibilities of new technology for the sake of public health.

The third party in this project, the educational institutions, would also be expected to take interest in the project as it would offer them an opportunity to develop their VPL procedures and to subsequently gain a large group of new 'customers', students.

### **Conflict of interest**

Some of the employees see the company's strategic competence development project as an opportunity to change career path and possibly get a new job in another sector or company. They will not necessarily submit to the strategic competence development that their work place have designated.

The same goes for some of them who prefer participation in education rather than exemptions.

This raises some ethical questions: who owns the project and the competence development and how do the career counselors from the educational institution manage a conflict of interests between the employer and the employee?

In this case the work place is the one taking the initiative to use VPL as a mean in strategic competence development and it shows that the employer and the employee may have different interests when it comes to competence development. The legal right to have your competences assessed in an educational institution is an individual and voluntary right.

In this case the initiative to use VPL is the employer's, and the principle of an individual and voluntary right may be challenged.

Furthermore, we have three stakeholders in this case: the workplace (the employer), the individual (the employee) and the educational institution. They are supposed to meet in a common understanding of how to measure and assess competences derived from work place learning, non-formal and informal learning. The company will use the estimated future competence demands of the company as a yardstick, the individual will use his or her future career options as a yardstick and the educational institution will use the objectives of the formal education.

|   | <b>Employer</b>  | <b>Employee</b>  | <b>Education</b>                                       |
|---|--|--|--|
| <b>Interest</b>                             | Development of company, effectively and cheap                  | Secure job<br>Career development<br>Personal development               | Learning and education                                 |
| <b>Yardstick for competence development</b> | Future job demands and competence demands                      | Future job, career   | Formal education                                       |
| <b>Yardstick for VPL</b>                    | Competence profiles derived from job functions 'roles'         | Individual job or competence profile                                   | Formal objectives corresponding to competence profiles |
| <b>Interest in VPL</b>                      | Exemptions and job function steered education for the employee | Shorter way to more education<br>Avoid double learning<br>Access to HE | More students<br>Motivated and goal oriented students  |

(Danish chart in Aagaard & Dahler (2010), translated and elaborated by EE)<sup>18</sup>

According to the normal procedures and quality assurance of the VPL process, the educational institution framed the interviews with the employees as career guidance interviews on the basis of the individual's portfolio. The individual's interests and the investigation of these interests were in focus– what did he or she wish/want, education? Career change? Money? – a formative approach to the VPL process.

The workplace had different expectations. They had expected the educational institution to deliver exemptions on the spot according to the job-role descriptions (the matrix) of the company. They had expected a summative approach and the use of VPL as a tool in strategic competence development, and not as a mean to facilitate the individual's career aspirations.

Most of the employees had expected the VPL process to be specific and concrete in regard to giving exemptions and carrying out their competence development plans, and many of them expressed surprise, but satisfaction at being met with an open and formative approach. However, their personal interests and career plans would not find recognition in the work place if they did not match with the strategy of the work place. So you could say that the open and formative approach of the educational institution in this case was a wrong approach and to some extent pulled the wool over the employee's eyes.

The work place and the educational institution agreed that a revision of expectations was called for. The work place should be more thorough in their work with identification of the competences of their employees, and the educational institution should produce methods for translation of the formal objectives of the modules and studies for the work

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18 Aagaard, K., Dahler, A.M. (2010): *Anerkendelse af realkompetencer – en grundbog*. Viborg: Via System,

place to use to build a portfolio that could be more appropriate to meet the requirements of an assessment.

### **Perspectives, challenges and dilemmas**

In both case studies a meeting takes place. In the first case study the individual meets with the educational institution and in the second case study the work place, the employee and the educational institution meet.

We have discussed some of the problems and dilemmas that might arise in the VPL process and we have suggested some ways out of the problems and dilemmas.

The main point is to secure the individual a successful VPL process with an outcome that matches the individual's expectations and aspirations and that might empower the individual.

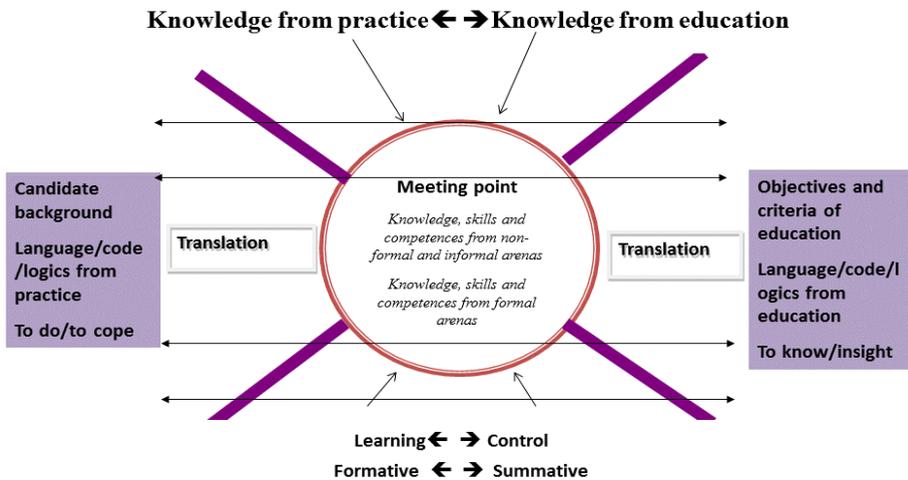
In the first case, where the individual meets with the educational institution we have brought attention to the importance of the role of the counselor. The counselor should be able to meet the individual with an open and formative approach to the process and in cooperation with the individual to investigate his life experience and competences. We saw that a professional career counselor was able to facilitate a learning process for the individual resulting in a clarification and a career plan. The role of the counselor in the VPL process is extremely important, and in continuation of this finding we argued, that it might be a good idea to challenge the dogma of never mixing the counseling and the assessing in order to make the non-formal and informal learning visible in the assessment.

In the second case, where the individual, the work place and the educational institution meet, we discussed the mutual interests and the conflicts of interest that might arise in the process. In this case the work place and the employees had mutual interests in securing and developing the jobs by competence development, but in carrying out the development plans by means of VPL, conflicts of interest could arise. The VPL process was staged at the educational institution starting with career guidance and thus opened the process with a formative approach. This resulted in false expectations as the employees did in fact not have a free choice of career development but had to submit to the competence development plans of the work place. The work place had expected the educational institution to move directly to an assessment and to grant exemptions on the basis of the employer's portfolios. This experience highlights the need for clear agreements and mutual understanding of roles, interests and expectations.

In both cases a successful outcome of the meeting depends on the ability of the parties involved to be able to transform or translate their codes in search for equivalence. There are different forms of knowledge and logics present at the meetings.

The model below tries to catch some of the challenges in establishing the meeting point, the third way or the transformation process.

## Validation of competences – a meeting point



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In a VPL process it is a question of bringing together different forms of knowledge and competences derived from different contexts, formal, non-formal and informal learning arenas. The challenge of a VPL process is to bring these different forms together and to be able to appreciate the value of the different forms of knowledge and competences. A translation of the codes and logics from the different arenas is called for in order to be able to meet in the VPL process. The educational institution must make an effort to translate their codified academic language into a language that can communicate with codified non-academic language and vice versa. The point is that a meeting point should be established for the parties involved to find a third way, to make a transformation of knowledge and competences happen. A meeting point where a process of learning and a process of control (assessment) can connect and where formative and summative approaches link together.

# Supporting migrants in the process of Validation of Prior learning

# 11

A French perspective

Bénédicte Halba

## Introduction

In the recommendation on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, the European Parliament and the Council (2008) state that:

*“The development and recognition of citizens' knowledge, skills and competence are crucial for the development of individuals, competitiveness, employment and social cohesion in the Community. Such development and recognition should facilitate transnational mobility for workers and learners and contribute to meeting the requirements of supply and demand in the European labour market. Access to and participation in lifelong learning for all, including disadvantaged people, and the use of qualifications should therefore be promoted and improved at national and Community level”.*

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) published in 2009 the *“European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning”* designed to strengthen the comparability and transparency of validation approaches and methods across national boundaries. The European Centre underlines that the concept of national qualifications system is now accepted (OECD, 2007) as:

*“all aspects of a country's activity that result in recognition of learning. These systems include the means of developing and putting in place national or regional policy on qualifications, institutional arrangements, quality assurance processes, assessment and awarding processes, skills recognition and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society”.*

The experts of Cedefop point out the terminological challenges. On the one hand, identification of non-formal and informal learning is seen as a process which *“records and makes visible the individual's learning outcomes. This does not result in a formal certificate or diploma, but it may provide the basis for such formal recognition”*. On the other hand, validation of non-formal and informal learning *“is based on the assessment*

*of the individual's learning outcomes and may result in a certificate or diploma".* The distinction between identification and validation reflects the distinction drawn between formative and summative assessment in research literature.

This article aims at showing the importance of taking into account the diversity of VPL by combining the legal framework (on a macro-level), the implementation of the process (on a meso-level) and the profiles of VPL candidates (on a micro-level).

In the first part, it is underlined how Valuing Prior Learning (VPL) has become a major issue in Europe, especially for non-formal and informal learning (Cedefop, 2009) in the past twelve years. In France, the process of VPL has a long history with the highlight of the 2002 Act dedicated to Social modernization, setting the basis for assessing a professional experience understood in a broader sense (paid, unpaid and voluntary activity).

In the second part, on the basis of three former projects implemented in Europe since 2003 (Vaeb, Va2el and Vab), several attempts are illustrated to identify, value and assess different kinds of non-formal and informal learning. Emphasized is the added value of the ALLinHE project, focused on publics with special needs (50+, migrants and disabled people).

In the last part, the support is explained to be provided to migrants and councilors to enhance the process of VPL. This concrete example is based on a French experience, the workshops offered to migrant audiences at the Cité des Métiers in Paris (2012-2013) in the framework of the ALLinHE project.

## **I. Valuing Prior Learning (VPL)**

As underlined by European experts (Duvekot, 2007 & 2014), the international terminology is quite diverse: Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) or Validation of Prior Learning (VPL). The most important element in an APL-strategy is the assessment of the competencies that are collected in a portfolio with the goal of getting exemptions or a diploma. In RPL, the primary focus lies on the identification and recognition of the competencies that someone might have obtained in any period in his/her life and in any kind of learning environment. In Validation of Prior Learning (VPL), it goes a step further than accreditation and recognition since it means a validation (or valuation) of prior learning measured against any learning objective and not just formalized standards. Whatever the terminology, the main idea in the process of APL, RPL or VPL is to take into account skills and competences in order to have an access to a diploma or certification and so to an official recognition (or even validation) of a learning acquired in many places (*at work, in leisure time activities and at home*)

### **VPL in Europe**

In the introduction to its *European Guidelines* (Cedefop, 2009), the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) underlines that:

*“Validating non formal and informal learning is increasingly seen as a way of improving lifelong learning and lifewide learning. More European countries are emphasizing the importance of making visible and valuing learning that takes place outside formal education and training institutions, for example at work, in leisure time activities and at home”.*

Policy-makers and practitioners are faced to main challenges to support this process. On the one hand they must propose a legal or at least official framework to enhance the process (top down approach), on the other hand they must offer concrete tool and method to support the process on the ground in order to make it be a reality (bottom up approach). In this perspective, Cedefop also points out the interdependence of validation of non-formal and informal learning and certification in the formal education and training system together with a broader range of stakeholders than required by formal learning. This is the main challenge to tackle.

Thanks to the reform of the Universities in Europe (Bologna process, 1999) accreditation in higher education is more comparable from one country to another especially for the employers. This is a key issue in enhancing mobility across Europe. Moreover, each of the countries has made an effort to express the content of the degrees, diplomas and certificates with regards to the skills and competences acquired and their link with the labour market (types of employment to be proposed). The Bologna process was designed to introduce a system of academic degrees that are easily recognisable and comparable, promote the mobility of students, teachers and researchers, ensure high quality teaching and incorporate the European dimension into higher education. Tangibly, the Bologna Declaration involved six actions relating to: a system of academic degrees that are easy to recognise and compare (a shared diploma supplement to improve transparency); a system based essentially on two cycles: a first cycle geared to the labour market and lasting at least three years, and a second cycle (Master’s) conditional on the completion of the first cycle; a system of accumulation and transfer of credits of the ECTS type used in the Erasmus exchange scheme; mobility of students, teachers and researchers: elimination of all obstacles to freedom of movement; cooperation with regard to quality assurance; the European dimension in higher education: an increase in the number of modules and teaching and study areas where the content, guidance or organisation has a European dimension (Bologna Declaration, 1999).

Complementing this clarification on formal learning, the Copenhagen process (Declaration by the European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training, and the European Commission, Copenhagen 2002) was intended to validate non-formal and informal learning. It is as an element of the National Qualification Framework (NQF) apart from the Bologna process. The Copenhagen process enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training (VET) aimed to improve the performance, quality and attractiveness of VET in Europe. It seeks to encourage the use of the various vocational training opportunities within the lifelong learning (LLL) context and with the help of the LLL tools. It consisted of: a political dimension, aiming to

establish common European objectives and reform national VET systems; the development of common European frameworks and tools that increase the transparency and quality of competences and qualifications and facilitate mobility; cooperation to foster mutual learning at European level and to involve all relevant stakeholders at national level. The priorities set by the Copenhagen Declaration provide the basis for voluntary cooperation in VET. With the target of 2010, they aim to reinforce the European dimension in VET, increase information, guidance and counselling on, as well as the transparency of VET and develop tools for the mutual recognition and validation of competences and qualifications.

### **VPL in France since 2002**

The national legislation for France is the Law n°2002-73 of the 17th of January 2002; termed the “Loi de modernisation sociale” it set a new paradigm named “Validation des acquis de l’expérience” (acronym: VAE). It can be used as a basis to award full qualifications, rather than just units or “parts” of a full diploma and so can be equivalent to a complete assessment leading to an award of formal qualifications (Charraud, 2007).

Since 2002, it has been modified and enriched, taking into account different situations. In 2014, the law includes 5 main points: VPL for access to diploma or certification with a professional goal (articles integrated in the Labour Code, in the education Code); VPL for access to national diploma of Higher Education (articles integrated in the Education Code); VPL for mothers or any person with family duties in order to have an access to a national diploma of Higher Education (articles integrated in the Education Code); a special “holiday” is offered in order to follow the process of VPL; a special point is underlined for engineers with a State Diploma .

The national guidance is provided by the National Vocational Certification Commission (Commission Nationale de la Certification Professionnelle- CNCP, <http://www.cncp.gouv.fr/>). The CNCP was created on the basis of the Law n°2002-73 of the 17th of January 2002 in order to provide information about the process of VAE, to decide the validity of the application, to propose a portfolio or “dossier” to be filled by the candidate describing her/his experience, to provide any relevant information to the “jury” for assessing their experience and competences. Some documents or practical guides are also provided by trades unions, or training bodies. To complement this, a public portal on VAE has been implemented explaining the different ways to have an access to VPL for VPL candidates but also for organisations in charge of VPL (<http://www.vae.gouv.fr/>).

The national strategy driving the legislation has started in France since 1934 when a specific procedure was set up to permit some “engineers” working in a firm without having the diploma of “engineer”. In the 1970s, with the development of continuing education, it appeared that it would be more economical to set curriculum according to the needs of the target groups concerned taking into account their prior learning. At the beginning of the 1980s a national policy trend proposed to increase the number of

people entering into higher education and so open the doors to direct access to Higher Education without having the Baccalauréat. The Law n°92-678 of the 20th of July 1992 promoted by the Ministry of Labour created the “Validation des acquis professionnels (VAP)”. Ten years after was adopted the Law on Validation des acquis de l’expérience (VAE).

On a national level, the only organization financed directly by the Ministry of Labour is the National Commission for professional Certification (CNCP) whose main mission is to update the National Repertoire for Professional Certification (RNCP) and to provide information on VPL in France. As far as the candidates are concerned, the PARE (Plan d'aide au retour à l'emploi), or PAP (Projet d'action personnalisé) are the two main devices explaining how this is financed. It is not paid on a national level but on both meso and micro-levels. The regional councils (local authorities in charge of training and employment) may also offer some financial support to candidates (chèque VAE) or the National agency for Employment.

There is no national policy for financing the application of VPL in general. It is closely linked to the special situation of the VPL candidates, and the organization he/she is addressing so both individuals (micro-level) and organisations (meso-level) are involved. It mainly depends on the status of the VPL candidate: paid staff, job-seeker, independent worker, civil servant, artist (special status), professional with a special contract (supported jobs), disabled people, EU nationals, refugee, prisoner. As a result the process will be financed on a collective or individual basis.

The responsibility of any institution in charge of VPL is to inform the candidates about the opportunities, to check whether the diploma/certification identified by the candidates is linked to the professional experience of the candidates, to check with the candidates whether the documents/information gathered are relevant, to prepare the candidates to the panel in front of which the VOL candidates will have to present themselves, to justify their experience and to show the skills and competences acquired (using for instance a portfolio).

The main VPL functions to be filled in by VPL professionals are the following: explaining the main legislation (basis of the VPL); presenting the RNCP in order for the candidates to identify the diploma they could select; supporting candidates to fill the form to apply for the “eligibility” of the process (whether the experience of the candidate is relevant for the competences and so diploma); supporting the candidate to fill the dossier in order to submit the all files to the panel – it may require 3 to 5 days (even more depending on the candidate). The length of time from the very first step to the last step may last one year or more.

Since the 2002 law, many points have been integrated in the VPL process focusing on the profiles of the candidates (house keepers, engineers, volunteers...) and/or on the kind of

activities (paid, unpaid or voluntary activities such as family duties, volunteering...) in order to be as comprehensive as possible in the non-formal and informal learning.

## II. VPL in perspective

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop, 2009) explains the two approaches for validating non formal and informal learning: formative and summative assessment. The formative approach to assessment is important as it draws attention to the identification of knowledge, skills and wider competences, a crucial part of lifelong learning. The summative validation needs to have a clearly defined and unambiguous link to the standards used in the national qualifications system (or framework). Aligning with this, the Cedefop emphasizes the three kinds of learning to be taken into account: formal, non-formal and informal learning.

### **The holistic approach of VPL: formal, non-formal and informal learning**

In its *European guidelines*, Cedefop explains the three forms of learning to be taken into account:

- *formal learning*, occurs in an organised and structured context (in a school/training centre or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically leads to qualification or certification.
- *non-formal learning*, is learning embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) but with an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically does not lead to certification.
- *informal learning*, results from daily work-related, family or leisure activities. It is not organised or structured (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner's perspective. It typically does not lead to certification.

As far as the formal learning is concerned, this is the easier part for VPL candidates to justify their experience and so the gained skills and competences as this type of learning is certified by a formal body: either educative body (school, university...) or training body or people in charge of human resources in firms (in the framework of vocational training). As far as informal and non-formal learning is concerned, this is more difficult for a VPL candidate as they must collect all the relevant information and justify the connection with the diploma or certification they mean to prepare in the VPL process.

Three European projects, implemented in the past ten years, have meant to design tool & methods to identify, value and/or assess non-formal and informal learning. They have been supported in the framework of the Lifelong learning programme, sub-programme Leonardo da Vinci: the Vaeb project (iriv and alii, 2003-2006, [www.eEuropeassociations.net](http://www.eEuropeassociations.net)), the Va2el project (INDL & iriv and alii, 2008-2010,

[www.va2el.eu](http://www.va2el.eu), and the VAB project (University of Evry Val d'Essonne-Ueve & iriv, 2009-2011, [www.vab-univ.eu](http://www.vab-univ.eu))

The first project, "VAEB- Assessing Voluntary Experience in a professional perspective", led by iriv (France) gathered 7 countries, between 2003-2006. It was awarded in Helsinki in 2006 for excellent practice in addressing the priorities of the Copenhagen process and promoting an enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training. The innovative approach was to propose to value non-formal and informal learning, on the basis of a voluntary experience. These skills and competences still neglected by the labour market have become crucial for the employability to meet the moving needs of the employers. The Vaeb addressed mainly youngsters, women and long-term unemployed people. It used self-evaluation of skills and competences, by volunteers themselves supported by a portfolio. As a result of this pioneer project, a voluntary experience was officially recognised as an informal and non-formal learning by the European Commission, in 2011, on the occasion of the European Year of Volunteering (EYV2011).

The VA2EL-Valuing Experience and Education of Local councillors, initiated by iriv together with the National Institute for Local Development (INDL) proposed to identify, evaluate and validate skills and qualifications acquired by local councillors as an informal learning for a professional purpose. Six countries were selected: France, Austria, Greece, Italy, Lithuania and Poland. The VA2EL project designed a portfolio, available through Internet (e-portfolio) for local councillors to help them identify and value the specific skills and competences acquired through their elected experience together with a handbook to use it in the labour market. The impact of the Va2el project was to better take into account the experience acquired by local councilors, to underline the required professionalization of their activity, and so to enhance recognition of their specific experience in the labour market. They could value key competences enhanced by the Lisbon strategy: social and civic competences, entrepreneurship and leadership spirit, and digital competence (with the e-portfolio).

The third project, "VAB- Valuing experience beyond University", led by the Ueve & iriv, gathered 5 countries between 2009 and 2011. The Vab project allowed students to identify activities fulfilled in complement to their University courses. It was a more holistic approach to value non formal and informal learning as four types of activities to be taken into account in the e-portfolio designed by the VAB: Sport, culture and art activities; involvement in association and active citizenship (association, student trade-union or political party); professional activities (training periods, "students job"); transnational /mobility activities (individual convention or in the framework of exchange programs such as the European Voluntary service or Erasmus or Leonardo mobility). The learning outcomes students might have developed could be expressed in terms of competences and to be valued on the labour market thanks to an e-portfolio to be filled by students and supported by University teachers & trainers (UTT).

These three projects designed a tool: a portfolio for the Vaeb, an e-portfolio for the Va2el and the VAB, which might be used to prepare a VPL process. The bottom-up approach enhanced by European projects under the lifelong learning programme was most appropriate to design such tools & methods on a European level to be applied afterwards on national levels.

### **A focus on people with special needs, the ALLinHE approach**

In complement to the process (tool & method), it is also important to focus on the profiles of VPL candidates. This is part of the added value of the ALLinHE project, an Erasmus project led by the Inholland University in Netherlands, Finland, Denmark, France, Romania, Slovenia, Switzerland, UK & South Korea, under the Erasmus sub-programme (2011-2014, [www.ALLinHE.eu](http://www.ALLinHE.eu)).

The project ALLinHE links the methods of Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) to a practical strategy for the social inclusion of special target groups underrepresented and non-traditional learners : migrants & ethnic minorities, persons aged over 50 years and disabled people.

ALLinHE is linked to the concern that Europe needs dynamic Higher Education (HE) to stay competitive but HE lacks an “open door policy”. Top down facilities are in place (legislation, EQF, etc) but practical methodology for opening up HE (bottom-up practices) often fails. VPL opens and supports learning chances for citizens but is mostly under developed and under-utilised. Testing innovative VPL should facilitate access to HE for social inclusion of target-groups and bridge the gap between the top-down and the bottom-up practices in HE. The main assumption of the project is that transforming existing VPL-methodology into a multi-targeted approach not only innovates the methodology of VPL but also orients HE into learning opportunities for all.

The project implements:

1. a multi-targeted VPL model providing a diagnostic or personalized, formative and summative approaches;
2. a comparative analysis of the VPL methods and approaches for the three main identified target groups;
3. a training programme for HE professionals to learn how to work with the VPL model;
4. a pilot of the multi-targeted VPL model with target groups and synthesis of test results, focusing on managing Europe’s diversity ;
5. a transversal analysis of new strategies and methods resulting in a handbook highlighting best practices for HE professionals with the multi-targeted VPL model;
6. an ALLinHE network gathering research, tests and evaluations of inclusive VPL practices;
7. a proposal of a European academic bank credit system.

Within the framework of the ALLinHE, a French experience was conducted by the Institute for Research and Information on Volunteering (iriv) among migrants.

### **III. VPL for migrants- an applied case for France**

Thanks to the ALLinHE project, several workshops were offered by iriv in partnership with the Cité des Métiers in Paris. They gathered migrants coming from different countries and continents (South America, Africa, Asia and Europe) and with different backgrounds (graduate or low qualified people). We will first present the methodological content of the workshops offered (2012-2013). We will then describe with the support provided to VPL councillors. We will then explain the weaknesses and strengths of a VPL for migrants, taking into account their profile (personal and professional) and their expectations, on the basis of their feedback.

#### **The Migrapass approach, an appropriate tool to support migrants' routes**

In the European guidelines (Cedefop, 2009), the experts analyzed the methods and instruments used to identify, assess and attribute recognition to learning that takes place outside formal education and training institution. The outcomes of these learning processes are diverse and multidimensional. The experts have noted an extensive use of portfolio approaches. They have also insisted on the fact that the selection process included in portfolio building "promotes self-assessment and focuses learners' attention on quality criteria". A good portfolio for validation, according to the assessors, is characterized by being easy to assess because it is focused on specific matched learning outcomes.

The Migrapass project, a Leonardo da Vinci project, led by Autemonde and iriv, in five countries, between 2010 and 2012 ([www.migrapass.eu](http://www.migrapass.eu)), designed a tool and methodology - a portfolio together with a companion - to support migrants to express their experience, identify their skills and competences, and to define the possible areas of employment, in the light of knowledge and skills developed through their individual experience: professional (including training,), social (volunteer work), personal, etc. The tool and method – a portfolio & companion – are meant to support migrants' capabilities to synthesize and value their experience (personal, social, professional...) in order to value them on the labour market. Using the portfolio, migrants can write their own profile, through a self-analysis of the knowledge and skills, useful to give them value and put into a single tool and method (the e-portfolio) the various experiences of the migrants, including informal and non-formal experiences.

The portfolio process follows a three-step process. The first step identifies relevant experiences acquired by migrants (professional and social experience together with the migration experience). The second step proposes a detailed description of the migrant's experience replacing it in its context (environment, available resources, and constraints for its achievement...). A third step is dedicated to the migrants' competences, which emerge from the description of the experience. The more the experience has been described, the better the competence can be identified and made transferable.

The migrant's route may be considered as a holistic experience. In the *Migrapass* portfolio, migrants are asked to identify and describe their professional experience both in their country of origin and the host country. The social experience has to be taken into account: it includes any kind of active citizenship activities (being a volunteer in an association, being an elected member of a local authority, being a member of the council of a village...). A migration experience gathers both internal and external migrations. The last type of experience is the personal and family experience (and the responsibilities within the family).

The core of the portfolio process is to express the experience in terms of competence. Twelve main competences are proposed to migrants: competence linked to the ability of making things, to managing and organising oneself, to developing a migration project, to working in a team, to communicating, to developing networks, to collecting and efficiently using information, to overcoming a difficult situation, to living and working in a different cultural environment, to transferring one's professional experience, to joining a new community, to defending rights. Migrants are asked to identify the competences most relevant to their experience and for their employment research and to evaluate the level of achievement corresponding to each of the competences: assisted competence (level 1), collaborative competence (level 2), autonomous competence (level 3), expert competence (level 4), and creative competence (level 5).

In the last part of the portfolio (the action plan), migrants are offered the opportunity to start a VPL process as a European diploma or a qualification is often required on the EU labour markets to be able to work as professionals. The *Migrapass* portfolio is the first part of the VPL process: being able to identify one's experience, then being able to express this experience in terms of competences and at last being convinced that the most appropriate way to assess/validate these competences is a diploma or certification.

### **The ALLinHE perspective, an appropriate support for VPL councillors**

The *Migrapass* and the ALLinHE share the same spirit:

- opening doors and changing perspectives especially among underrepresented target groups in the lifelong learning perspective (the example of migrants);
- integrating different tools & approaches to manage diversity (on a European and non-European levels);
- implementing a holistic approach combining personal, social and professional experiences;
- facilitating the access to VPL in enhancing a mentoring approach: trainers/mentors are offered a special strategy (assessor training manual for the ALLinHE);
- combining the top-down and the bottom-up approaches : both are important to better understand the opportunities offered by VPL (micro-level, meso-level and macro-level);
- considering the validation of competences as a two way process.

The competence approach is a key issue in a successful professional integration in the long term. Because of the lack of national experience or because of the linguistic issue, migrants could be, in the short term, oriented on very basic tasks and low qualified employments. In the mid-term or long-term, the Migrapass approach allows them to improve their professional career and to make a positive choice: either to stay in their present position or to change it in valuing other competences.

The most important risks underlined by the Cedefop experts, in the process of validating non formal and informal learning, are when applicants prepare the portfolio alone or with little mediation from one tutor. Learning by doing and by transmitting one's own experience to other migrants is the basic philosophy of the Migrapass. This is part of the empowerment spirit: making migrants be the main agents of their own integration. Some of the "trainees" are selected to become tutors in the future with other migrants.

Raising awareness of councillors in charge of VPL on the special profile and expectations of migrant publics was a main concern of the ALLinHE project. The first step was to dispatch among them the tool, the Migrapass portfolio as the first tool designed in France to take into account experiences and competences acquired thanks to migratory background. The approach is holistic: the Migrapass portfolio combines professional, social and migratory experiences in order to express them in terms of competences. This was the important point to underline: a migratory experience is not central but valued in complement to other experiences (professional, social, personal...). For migrants who have no professional experience (in the sense of paid activity) in France, it was important to show that voluntary experience could be considered as a "professional experience" on condition that they could provide all the relevant elements to prove the reality and relevance of the volunteering (in terms of activities fulfilled and competences acquired).

The second main point was to underline the requirements for being an efficient VPL assessor. A guide was dispatched, based on the councils provided by the Assessor Training Manual published by VPL experts in Netherlands (see: Duvkot and Geerts, 2012). The method insisted on the 9 main competences any train assessor should possess: Managing, Presenting, Learning, Guiding, Commitment and conviction, Applying professionalism, Attention and understanding, Ethics and integrity, Management of the needs and Expectations of the "customer". If the 8 first points could be easily understood, the last point could raise some problem among VPL councillors who are not familiar to work with migrant audiences. The guide also emphasized the different roles to be played by VPL councillors: speaker, leader, coach, organizer, advisor and developer.

At last, it was crucial to underline that lifelong learning, as integration, is a two way process. Bridging the gap between University and the Community is a challenging issue. Even though University remains the place to deliver diplomas and to propose a reference framework of qualifications, the door is open to any kind of learning to be assessed thanks to the recognition of VPL in many European countries. People from civil society, both professionals and/or volunteers, have already been associated with the assessment

of learning outcomes as far as their activity may be concerned by the VPL. A “new deal” of the validation of competences would consist in enhancing a circular approach of lifelong learning that is closely linked to its genuine spirit (Halba, 2012). Present learners may become future assessors and vice versa. This is also part of the empowerment process: changing our perspectives and being able to play a different role. It is not enough to open a door: opening spirits may be the alternative term for enhancing a meaningful and sustainable validation of the competences.

### **Feedback received from migrants as potential VPL candidates**

As a result of the workshops offered by the Institute for Research and Information on Volunteering – iriv (French partner of the ALLinHE), at the Cité des Métiers in Paris (October 2012- December 2013), we could have feedback from the migrants themselves. After presenting the profiles of the participants, we will explain the reasons why they attended the workshop and the weaknesses/strengths of a VPL according to their situation (more details in the **annex**).

The number of participants was 48 (100%): 17 men (35%) and 31 women (65%). They could attend one, two or three workshops. In the beginning, two workshops were proposed: the first one focussed on the Migrapass portfolio (to explain the tool to be used for the VPL), the second one was dedicated to the ALLinHE (the steps to be followed in a VPL in France, information on the national framework on a macro-level and on the organisations to be contacted on a meso-level).

The nationals (French people) were mostly people working with migrants (professionals) or individuals willing to support migrants (friends or colleagues); they represent 20% of the total. The other participants came mainly from:

- Central and South-America : Colombia, 25% ; Mexique, 14.5% ; Haïti, 4% ; Bolivia, 4%, Chili, 2%.
- Europe: Portugal (6%), Romania (2%), Italy (2%) and Serbia (2%).
- Africa: Somalia (4%); Algeria (4%); Syria (2%) Mali (2%) and Senegal (2%).

The information for the workshop was mainly disseminated through the network of the Union of Latin associations in France which explains the numerous Latin American participants. The other participants were mainly addressed by councillors at the Cité des Métiers.

The main reasons for attending the workshops were:

- valuing a foreign diploma (28%) ;
- valuing one’s competences (17%),
- working with migrants (13%),
- looking for a job and willing to identify competences (17%),
- valuing a migratory experience (11%),
- willing to have access to a French diploma (4%).

The main weaknesses to start a VPL process among migrants were:

- Many participants did not know the existence of the VPL process or if they had heard of it thought it addressed only nationals
- The access seems to be very selective, especially it is very hard to understand the different steps to be followed: first identification of the diploma/certification available for a VPL in the National repertory for professional certification (RNCP);
- The process appears to be long, risky and uncertain; a traditional course (vocational training proposing a diploma/certification) is easier to understand;
- The question of the same recognition of a diploma/certification obtained thanks to a VPL compare to the one passed thanks to a “traditional course” was raised;
- Poorly qualified migrants were faced with special difficulties relating to collection of all the information required to justify their experience (contracts, attestations...) or a level of competence (diploma, certification...); this was not the case for qualified migrants who were used to the process;
- Poorly qualified migrants were faced with difficulties relating to filling out the written documents required by the VPL process (the same for the portfolio);
- The VPL process requires a good level of linguistic competence, especially a written level of French;
- Even among highly qualified migrants, the portfolio approach was not familiar and had to be explained carefully.

The main strengths in favour of a VPL process among migrants:

- Being able to speak the language of competences; the proposed 12 competences in the Migrapass portfolio can be enriched either by the competences described in the ROME (repertory of employments & trades published by the National Agency for Employment) or by the description of the diploma/certification in the RNCP
- Having a basis to identify an experience and to express it in terms of competences (thanks to the portfolio approach); the process is a good exercise to prepare for a professional interview;
- Being able to find in the National repertory for professional certification (RNCP) a diploma/certification in connection with the diploma/certification obtained in their country of origin;
- Being aware that professional support could be provided to assist them in the VPL process to better understand the requirements;
- The tool - the portfolio - could be used as a pedagogical tool among migrants with a basic level of French; it was a good exercise in speaking “professional French” ;
- For many participants, whatever the level of qualification, low or high, the requirements of the portfolio (synthesis of the experiences) were also a good exercise to prepare them for an interview (being able to make a short presentation, being able to bring any relevant document to justify their statement...).

The experimentation implemented at the Cité des Métiers (October 2012 to December 2013, i.e 14 months) was too short to know how many participants were convinced of the usefulness of the VPL process. The positive feedback concerned mainly the method used (the portfolio approach) and a better knowledge of the competences.

It is too soon to know if the ALLinHE project will have an impact on the number of migrants involved in a VPL process. However, the positive feedback received was that many participants attended more than two workshops. Some of them decided to come back regularly in order to share information with others and to explain the new difficulties faced. In this perspective, the workshop offered at the Cité des Métiers has become a club since January 2014.

Among the Cité des Metiers, the connections with other clubs could be implemented: since the beginning with the Club El Taller (offered by the Union of Latin American associations and addressing nationals from Latin American countries), also with the Club Dynamiques Africaines (offered by the GRDR and addressing nationals from African countries). The Club offered by iriv addresses all migrants, whatever their country of origin and whatever the level of qualification.

### **Conclusion**

Validation of competences has been a crucial issue in Europe for the past twelve years. Even though the EU has not yet become "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy" as promised at the Lisbon Council in 2000, many positive elements may be underlined. Considering the underrepresented target groups and untraditional learners, a main added value of the ALLinHE project is to "open doors" and to take into account special profiles and expectations of VPL candidates.

The "open door" strategy is to be understood in many ways. Combining the top-down approach (EU and States providing legislation and financial support for VPL) and the bottom-up approach (individuals and organisations willing to be better supported for the access to Higher Education and proposing tools & methods to do so) may be a challenging one. The several European projects we have presented illustrate this bottom-up strategy. The Vaeb designed a portfolio for volunteers, the Va2el an e-portfolio for local councillors and the Vab an e-portfolio for students to be assessed by University teachers & trainers (UTT). The ALLinHE combined both a multi-targeted VPL model providing diagnostic or personalized, formative and summative approaches for three groups of people with special needs: 50+, migrants and disabled people.

The diversity of the national legislation on VPL, together with the diverse profiles of VPL councillors and various expectations of VPL candidates are main issues to be taken into consideration if we really want to promote an "open door" approach. At any level many obstacles may be raised. On a macro-level, there might be a misunderstanding on the VPL framework combined with difficulty accessing VPL information. On a meso-level, professionals working with people with special needs (50+, migrants, disabled people) are most of the time not connected with VPL councillors. This lack of connection might

be a main obstacle to making VPL accessible. On a micro-level, people with special needs are not properly informed according to their testimonies: the information exists but they do not feel the VPL device is of value to them because they think they are too old (50+), other devices are offered to them (disabled people) or they thought the VPL process was designed for nationals (migrants).

Equality of opportunity to have access to VPL, whatever one's age, profile, professional or social background could be a challenging goal, in Europe, for the decade to come. There are many ways to overcome this challenge. Involving the actors at all levels (macro, meso and micro levels) is a main issue. Enhancing transparency is another crucial issue as information seem to be differently understood depending on who is explaining the VPL process: institutional speech focussed on the general framework (general principle) on a macro-level, technical speech focussed on the different steps to go through (process) on a meso-level, personal speech focused on the many barriers to overcome (sometimes disappointment compared to the original hope) on a micro-level.

VPL remains an on-going process. The feedback from many individuals having been through the process with their expectations, deceptions or positive achievements is not known nor scientifically analysed. It would be most valuable to focus on testimonies of VPL candidates who succeeded in the process and became themselves VPL councillors. In the same spirit, how far do the policy makers take into account the feedback from those on the ground: not through organisations in charge of VPL but directly from the candidates themselves? Does there exist a data bank of VPL candidates explaining the reasons for their success or their failure? This might be the story to be written for the 10 years to come. VPL: to be continued.

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**Annex – workshops held by iriv at the Cité des Métiers in Paris**

*Table 1 : Participants according to gender*

|              | MEN | WOMEN | TOTAL |
|--------------|-----|-------|-------|
| Participants | 17  | 31    | 48    |
| Percentages  | 35% | 65%   | 100%  |

*Tableau 2 : Participants according to countries of origin*

|          | Participants | Proportion |
|----------|--------------|------------|
| France   | 10           | 20,83      |
| Colombia | 12           | 25,00      |
| Mexico   | 7            | 14,58      |
| Portugal | 3            | 6,25       |
| Somalia  | 2            | 4,17       |
| Haïti    | 2            | 4,17       |
| Algeria  | 2            | 4,17       |
| Bolivia  | 2            | 4,17       |
| Syria    | 1            | 2,08       |
| Chile    | 1            | 2,08       |
| Romania  | 1            | 2,08       |
| Iran     | 1            | 2,08       |
| Italy    | 1            | 2,08       |
| Mali     | 1            | 2,08       |
| Serbia   | 1            | 2,08       |
| Senegal  | 1            | 2,08       |
| Total    | 48           | 100,00     |

*Tableau 3 : Participants according to reason for attending.*

|                                       | Participants | Pourcentages |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|
| Willing to value a foreign diploma    | 13           | 28,26        |
| Willing to value one's competences    | 8            | 17,39        |
| Working with migrant audiences        | 6            | 13,04        |
| Looking for a job                     | 8            | 17,39        |
| Double courses                        | 4            | 8,70         |
| Councilling on a migratory experience | 5            | 10,87        |
| Interested by the VPL                 | 2            | 4,35         |
| Total                                 | 46           | 100,00       |



# The case of VPL and industry focused programmes in Cork Institute of Technology 12

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Deirdre Goggin, Irene Sheridan and Tim Horgan

## Introduction

While engagement is often presented as a third mission of universities, encompassing the full range of external interactions with enterprises, individuals and communities, separate and distinct from the first two missions of teaching and research, it is only effective if it is closely interlinked with them. Vorley and Nelles (2008) describe the third mission as a 'thread that has the capacity to weave together teaching and research, while assuming a more economic and societal focus'. Viewed in this way, engagement is not separate from education and research, but rather a new lens through which to view teaching and learning and research activities. Goddard clearly articulates the dangers associated with disjointed approaches.

*'Insofar as external engagement is taking place, the academic heartland is protected by specialist units dealing with technology transfer and continuing education. However the external engagement agenda... requires institutional responses, co-ordination and transversal mechanisms.'* (Goddard 2005, p. 30).

In the past number of years there have been changes in approach at a national and international level as to how programs are devised, delivered and supported. There has been a significant shift in thinking on what learning is valued, coupled with where and how learning can be achieved. There is also an increased emphasis on professionalism within the enterprise domain and the need for on-going support for the acquisition of skills and competencies to ensure growth and sustainability within a changing and competitive global marketplace.

There has been a 'paradigm shift in higher education, one from a focus on teaching, to a focus on learning' (Barr & Tagg 1995). There is a tension between the traditional academic approach and the newer demands of students to have an understanding of the application of their learning rather than knowledge alone. There is increasingly a demand for student-centred programmes which focus on developing the learners rather than solely delivering education and assessment.

In 2011, the Irish national strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) identified 'higher education as a mechanism to make Ireland

a country recognized for innovation, competitive enterprise and continued academic excellence'. Several areas were outlined which would require change and attention including:

- Engagement with the community
- Changes in teaching and learning
- Assessment
- Quality assurance systems

As a result of this report there is increased focus on educational institutions and how they need to change in terms of 'autonomy, collaboration, to become outward facing and fully accountable for quality and efficiency outcomes. 'This demand was in part addressed through the Strategic Innovation Funding provided by the Higher Education Authority to transform higher education in Ireland.

The economic climate in Ireland has had an influence on how industries and organisations are engaging with training and development in terms of planning for the future and having a workforce capable of responding to market changes. Training and development units within companies are more conscious of spending budgets on activities which will have a relevance to the employee but also the organisation and organisational development goals.

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland invested significant funding in the restructuring of higher education in Ireland in an attempt to make it more responsive to the economic changes and more dynamic in its educational offerings going forward. One such funded project was the Roadmap for Employer Academic Partnerships (REAP) which built on the work of the Education in Employment (EIE) project which collectively focused on the workplace as a centre for learning, the aligning of industry and higher education in the creation of more relevant and meaningful programmes. Research conducted and reviewed by the Irish national consortiums of the Education in Employment (EIE) and Roadmap for Employer Academic Partnerships (REAP) project <sup>19</sup> included the perspectives of eleven Irish Higher Education institutions and their collaborations with industry.

The findings of the consortium centred on the relationship which should exist within a work-based learning arrangement. As graphically demonstrated in the diagram the Higher Education Institution, employer and employee all have an equal part to play in successful work-based learning engagements (Linehan, 2008). It is the inclusion of the requirements or motivations of each of the actors that leads to positive results as opposed to it being dominated by one.

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<sup>19</sup> The work of the Education in Employment and REAP projects was partially funded by the Higher Education Authority under the Strategic Innovation Fund.

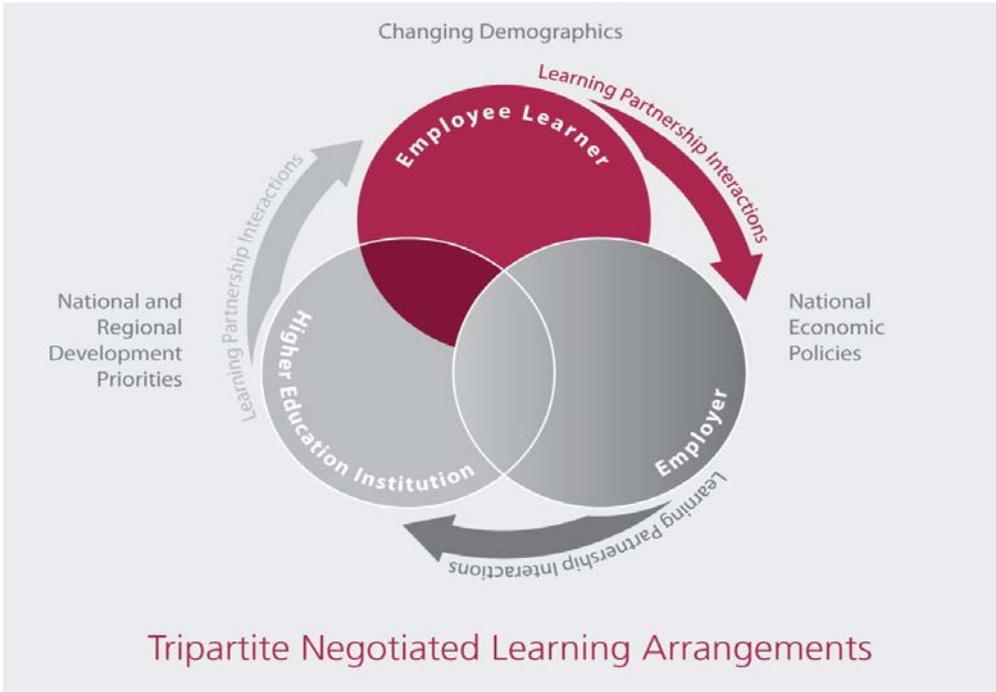


Figure 1 Tripartite learning arrangement Customised Learning Development; An Exploration of Practice

In a review of practice in Customised Learning developments to meet specific industry needs good practice guidelines were developed from an analysis of a number of different practice arrangements for the general stages in customised course development (Sheridan and Murphy, 2012). These stages which are outlined below. They are not

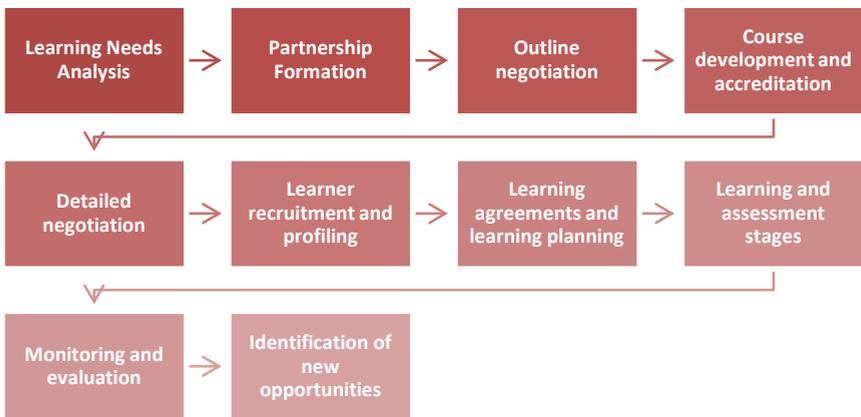


Figure 2. Main Steps in Customised Course Development

indicative of a rigid process but provide a good general approach which may be useful to those interested in course development in a response to workplace needs.

The report also identified the following enablers for customised learning development programmes with industry;

- Existing relationship and good mutual understanding between the higher education institution and the company.
- Clear points of contact and commitment to the vision and the process from both sides
- Clear decision structures in each organisation with regard to the development of a customised programme so that changes are clearly and easily implemented
- Identifiable learning need to motivate both in developing an appropriate solution.
- Flexible approaches to learning and assessment
- Availability of funding
- Existing exemplars which show the potential of HEI employer engagements

These factors as outlined above have informed the practice of CIT in its engagements with Industry. In terms of RPL / VPL, RPL policy and practice has existed within CIT since 1999 and applies to all courses in all disciplines and at all levels of the framework. In CIT, RPL can be used for entry, advanced entry, module exemption and full academic award based on prior informal and non-formal learning. As Institutes of Technology place significant emphasis on the development of programmes closely aligned to the needs of the workplace and with enterprise partners, the integration of workplace competences within higher education is very much within their remit.

Increased negotiation with workplaces to keep pace with enterprise changes and challenges which will have an impact on graduate skill requirements in the future is also a factor of which HEIs have to be mindful, however the challenge is in striking the balance between education and industry priorities. These priorities can be achieved through strategic partnerships to develop customised learning pathways that are sensitive both to the learner profile and existing skill set and are informed by the unfolding organisational needs.

This article reflects on how Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) has been responding to these challenges. CIT is a publicly funded higher education provider. It is the largest provider of the network of thirteen Institutes of Technology. The Institute makes its own awards at undergraduate and taught Masters level, under Delegated Authority from Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).

CIT currently has in the region of 15,000 registered students; approximately 7,000 are registered full-time on third-level programmes, and the remaining part-time students. CIT's education, research and training provision spans a wide variety of disciplines, from business and humanities through engineering and science to music, drama, art & design and nautical studies.

To demonstrate the variation in programme development the experiences of Cork Institute of Technology will be discussed in the context of two different workplace engagements incorporating the validation of prior learning in a response to an industry need whilst maintaining academic standards.

### **In the cloud**

In the reports by the Irish Expert Group on Future Skill Needs (EGFSN) since 2008 the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) sector is predicted to continue to grow, develop and provide employment into the foreseeable future in Ireland. In conjunction with this growth, there is also an expansion of scope of skill set required by graduates and employees. In terms of graduate development, education and training institutions are altering the content of their programmes to cater for these new skill needs. However research predicts a continuing gap between the available graduates and the recruitment needs. There is also a significant cohort already working in the industry with an extensive level of workplace experience and informal and non-formal learning either in, or related to, the emerging areas. In addition, there are industries with extremely competent workforces with a strong non formal training ethos but academic qualifications have become the tender for measuring the professionalism of a workforce. This case study relates to an approach by a Higher Education Institution in working with employers to respond to industry needs building on existing learning towards academic validation.

In 2011, Cork Institute of Technology launched two online programmes, the BSc and MSc in Cloud Computing. These customised programmes were developed in close consultation with employer organisations in a response to the growing need for skills in cloud and associated technologies. The consultative development process integrated the emerging workplace competences, informal and non-formal learning into the content and learning outcomes of the programme. Participation in the programme was also facilitated through advanced entry via a recognition of prior learning (RPL) route for those with appropriate prior learning but without the prerequisite formal academic qualifications.

The partnership for these programmes extends to the delivery of elements of the programmes by industry subject matter experts as appropriate. To date, 270 individuals have participated in the programmes from countries such as Ireland, Russia, United States, Egypt and India.

In addition, to widen participation in these programmes, the institute in collaboration with workplace partners continues to identify pathways for workplace learners to gain access by building on their appropriate work place learning, which incorporates informal and non-formal learning.

One additional development in this arena was the annual funding of programmes since 2012 under the ICT skills conversion courses government funded initiatives as a response to job creation. The programmes are designed to address future skill requirements by

employer organisations in the ICT sector. Due to the economic situation in Ireland there are graduates with high levels of skill in a variety of disciplines but not necessarily in Information Technology. The qualification attainment demonstrates the academic aptitude of the individual. In terms of outcomes of this engagement the result has been that 100% of graduates secured employment, predominantly within companies involved in the initial BSc/ MSc engagement.

To provide an insight into the diversity of engagements the second case study relates to the *Irish Naval Service (INS)*.

The engagement between CIT and Irish Naval Service began over twenty years ago. In relation to workforce development the Naval service has a strong tradition of non-formal learning in the workplace. In terms of validation, this learning has traditionally been exclusively for the purposes of workforce and rank progression and had no academic credit attributed to it.

In 2008, the Irish Naval Service realised that if they were to become the most professional Naval service in the world by 2015 they needed to re-examine their approach to training and development. In particular, there was a need to link the level of their training to a level on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications to facilitate academic progression. It was also desirable for personnel to have qualifications which were recognised outside of the defence forces.

In terms of workplace development and the workplace as a centre for learning, in 2008 CIT and the Irish Naval Service (INS) collaborated on the inclusion of a stream within the BSc (hons) in Nautical Science specifically for INS personnel. The content of the four modules integrated and built upon the pre-existing non formal training from the workplace.

In addition, as the INS personnel are active in the workplace whilst completing the course then a workplace mentor network was created to support the learner in completing the modules. This mentor network exists where ever the employee is stationed either on land or at sea. The assessment is jointly conducted by workplace senior officers and academic staff which further demonstrates the level of collaboration in this engagement.

As the programme is validated by CIT then it is subject to the institute's academic quality standards policy which underpins all academic programmes. The programme successfully created further employment and study options to participants and built on their prior and developing workplace learning. The impact for the Irish Naval Service was that it restructured their approach to all training and development in terms of aligning to the national framework of qualifications and in courses linked to staff progression which were traditionally designed and delivered solely by the workplace. It also opened up new possibilities in terms of course development from undergraduate to professional doctorate studies.

### **Benefits, challenges and barriers**

As identified in the report 'Customised Learning Development; An Exploration of Practice (Sheridan and Murphy, 2012), the benefits of engaging in this way can be divided into the benefits for the HEI partner which include the following :

- Increased student numbers and the associated income stream
- Increased diversity of learners
- Organisational learning and staff development
- Enhanced relevance and currency of the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes
- Other opportunities for engagements and access to expertise and resources

These benefits will only be realised if there are also benefits to the Industry partner such as the following:

- Improved employee knowledge, skills and competence
- Enhanced employee satisfaction and improved retention
- Profile as a learning organisation
- Improved productivity and work practices
- Other opportunities for engagements and access to expertise and resources

These engagements are not without their challenges for CIT such as resourcing and the academic calendar. Flexible initiatives can be troublesome as they can lie outside of individual's time tables and also the moratorium on recruitment in the public service prevents the hiring of new academics to deliver the workplace programmes. In terms of these engagements the issue to appointing adjunct faculty members if the expertise resides in the enterprise rather than the HEI can also be problematic. The major challenge is in the fixed semesterisation timetable which seldom coincides with when industry is interested in engaging so a delay in initial rollout can happen which can be frustrating for the industry partner.

In general, other barriers as identified in the Customised Learning Development report include:

- Unrealistic expectation of time, effort, cost involved
- Cultural conflicts including skill vs. education dilemma
- Lack of awareness of HEI capability and capacity
- Inaccurate learning needs analysis , over-projection by company of the level of need
- Lack of infrastructure/ systems within the institution for registration and invoicing of non-standard students
- Lack of infrastructure at college level for costing/pricing
- Challenges associated with resourcing new initiatives
- Rigidity of HEI contracts and the lack of clear recognition or reward for HEI staff
- Inflexibility of processes in relation to non-standard students and the place and pace of the learning and assessment processes;
- Relevance and currency of HEI course content and lack of recognition of learning gained outside of HEI.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the inclusion of work place requirements in terms of the validation of prior learning presents opportunities for Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and employers. The challenge is in identifying, designing and managing the engagement to satisfy the needs of the employer, employee and HEI.

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[http://www.heai.ie/files/files/DES\\_Higher\\_Ed\\_Main\\_Report.pdf](http://www.heai.ie/files/files/DES_Higher_Ed_Main_Report.pdf)
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# Experiences with Validation of Prior Learning in higher education in Norway

# 13

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## Developing guidelines for validation of prior learning towards exemptions in higher education

Camilla Alfsen

### Introduction

Validation of prior learning has been on the political agenda in Norway since 1999 when the Parliament asked the Government “to establish a system that gives adults the right to document their non-formal and informal learning without having to undergo traditional forms of testing”.

The Norwegian concept of validation refers to validation of all types of prior learning – formal, non-formal and informal. The importance of guaranteeing the right of the individual to such validation is reflected in key legislation and national strategies.

At a strategic level, there has been a development towards policies aimed at broad, differentiated opportunities for competence development. In the Strategy for Lifelong Learning 2007<sup>20</sup> (Ministry of Education and Research), validation of informal and non-formal learning was one of the main priorities. The Government’s initiative on Lifelong Learning 2009<sup>21</sup> states that the system for validating prior learning must be promoted and strengthened.

Vox, Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning have worked with VPL at national level since 1999. The Ministry of Education and Research has given Vox the role as a national competent body on VPL. Vox cooperates with other national actors in this field. In 2011 Vox made a report on the status of VPL in Norway. The report gives an overview of the activity in different sectors, based on documentation published since the legislation was introduced in 2000<sup>22</sup>.

### The Norwegian validation system

The Norwegian validation system is based on shared principles in all sectors; among others that the validation process should be voluntary and beneficial for the individual. Various stakeholders promote the opportunities, rights and benefits related to the validation process, at local and national levels.

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20 [http://www.regjeringen.no/Rpub/STM/20062007/016EN/PDFS/STM200620070016000EN\\_PDFS.pdf](http://www.regjeringen.no/Rpub/STM/20062007/016EN/PDFS/STM200620070016000EN_PDFS.pdf)

21 [http://www.regjeringen.no/pages/2235526/PDFS/STM200820090044000EN\\_PDFS.pdf](http://www.regjeringen.no/pages/2235526/PDFS/STM200820090044000EN_PDFS.pdf)

22 Alfsen, C. og Hernes, M.S. (2013): Realkompetansevurdering – status og utfordringer 2011. Vox, Oslo, 2013

In the Norwegian validation system, prior learning is validated against learning outcomes in curricula from each education sector. In lower and upper secondary educations prior learning is validated against learning outcomes in national curricula. The validation is performed in adult education centers at county or community level. In tertiary vocational education and higher education prior learning is validated against learning outcomes in local curricula developed in each institution. The validation is performed locally in each institution. Procedures for validation and criteria used in validation are decided locally at each institution.

All validation of prior learning in Norway follows the same overall procedure, regardless of education levels:



Over the past two years Vox has been responsible for developing guidelines for validation towards enrolment in tertiary vocational education and towards exemption in higher education. The guidelines have been developed in cooperation with relevant stakeholders from the sector. In 2013, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training developed national standards for validation in lower and upper secondary education.

### Laws and regulations

*Validation of prior learning* is regulated by law in Norway:

- *Primary education.* Adults who are entitled to lower secondary education have a statutory right to have their prior learning validated. Their competences are assessed against learning outcomes in the national curricula, and approved subjects are certified in their final primary education diploma.
- *Upper secondary education.* Adults who are entitled to upper secondary education have the same right to validation of prior learning. This applies for adults who want to enter upper secondary education, and for those who only want a competence certificate.

In the validation process, the candidates' competences will be assessed against the learning outcomes in the national curricula. The candidates have a right to get a diploma or a competence certificate that confirms the approved learning outcomes from the curriculum.

Adults who are not entitled to upper secondary education, can have their prior learning validated if they are referred from the Labour and Welfare Administration or the municipal authorities.

- *The right to validation of prior learning* in primary education and lower and upper secondary education is regulated in the Education Act.
- *Tertiary vocational education.* Enrolment in tertiary vocational education is usually based on a vocational diploma from upper secondary education. Candidates without a vocational diploma are also entitled to apply for enrolment if they can document relevant competence from prior learning according to the requirements for admittance in the specific institution.
- *Higher education.* As for higher education, adults (age 25 or above) without a general college and university admissions certification can apply for enrolment to a specific study programme on the basis of documented prior learning. This right was introduced in 2001. Documentation of informal and non-formal learning may also provide a basis for exemption from modules in the study programme, which means that students may be granted study points from the institution based on validation of their experiences and competences acquired outside the institution.

### **Validaton of prior learning in Higher Education**

#### *Admission*

Applicants seek admission to Higher Education in Norway via The Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service (NUCAS) or directly to the preferred institution.

Numbers from 2012 show that app. 3.4 % of the total student population of 244,000 students are adults seeking admission based on prior learning. About 50 % of the VPL applicants applied via NUCAS, the rest applied directly to the preferred institution. 8,254 adult students applied in 2012. 3,835 of them (46 %) were qualified. 3,145 were granted a study place and 2,044 started their studies.<sup>23</sup>

#### *Reports*

There are not many reports on VPL in Higher Education in Norway. In 2004 the Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation (NIFU) conducted a mapping of status two years after the VPL legislation was introduced.<sup>24</sup> Two reports from 2009 describe how VPL students cope during their studies<sup>25</sup> and point out some challenges in VPL practice based on case studies in three institutions<sup>26</sup>.

#### *Status*

VPL in Higher Education in Norway works quite well for students who apply for admission based on prior learning. However, it is likely that very few institutions validate towards exemptions.

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23 Vox(2013): The Vox Mirror. Vox, Oslo.

24 Helland og Opheim (2004): *Kartlegging av realkompetansereformen*. NIFU skriftserie 6, NIFU, Oslo

25 Holmesland og Lundin, (2009): *Formal and Informal Learning: Shall the Twain Ever Meet in Adult Education?* Forskningsserie 16/2009, Høgskolen i Akershus, Kjeller

26 Mohn og Størset (2009): *Realkompetanse innen høyere utdanning. En studie ved tre institusjoner*. Vox, Oslo.

## Survey

As mentioned above, VPL in Higher Education works quite well in the admission processes. All Higher Education Institutions in Norway have systems for VPL for admission. However, there are no data showing to what extent VPL is used for granting exemptions.

VPL towards exemptions means that a student may apply for exemptions from parts of the study programme based on documented competence from other learning arenas. To be granted an exemption means that the student does not need to participate in the exempted activity. And the student will receive documentation from the institution that his/her learning outcomes have been approved by the institution, and are equal to outcomes expected in the exempted activity.

In cooperation with a working group appointed by The Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions (UHR), Vox decided to perform a national survey in 2011 to investigate the use of VPL in Higher Education Institutions. The survey was conducted in October 2011 and covered the study period of 2010/2011. The results were presented in a report.<sup>27</sup>

The survey included all Higher Education Institutions in Norway and 57 of 72 respondents replied. The respondents represent 33 Higher Education Institutions. Only 12 respondents, 8 institutions, had been granting exemptions in 2010/2011. 198 of 200 applications were approved. This suggests that VPL towards exemptions is seldom used, but if used, it is often successful.

The survey also revealed that many institutions were uncertain as to how VPL procedure should be performed with high quality and consequently, they did not inform students about or advertise very effectively the possibility of VPL towards exemptions.

Vox presented these results at a national conference for the HE sector in November 2011 and was encouraged by the conference to follow up these results by developing guidelines for VPL towards exemptions.

## Developing guidelines

The guidelines were developed in close cooperation with Higher Education Institutions in Norway. Vox and the working group visited Glasgow Caledonian University in Scotland and three institutions in Norway with experience with VPL processes. Based on these visits, Vox wrote a draft version of the Guidelines and arranged regional seminars with HE institutions to discuss the draft version.

As a consequence of these seminars the guidelines have a structure and a content that is adjusted to the target group which is the professional and administrative staff at the Higher Education Institutions that are somehow involved in VPL towards exemptions.

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27 Storli, Randi; Notat 5/2012; *Realkompetanse og fritak i høyere utdanning*; Vox 2011  
<http://www.vox.no/no/Analyse-og-dokumentasjon/rapporter/Realkompetanse-og-fritak-i-hoyere-utdanning/>

The content is meant to give practical input and avoid lengthy explanations of already known issues.

The Guidelines were published at the Vox website and presented at a national conference in October 2013.

### Guidelines

The original Guidelines are only available in Norwegian at the moment.<sup>28</sup> In the following text the term Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is used instead of Validation of Prior Learning (VPL). These guidelines describe how to handle claims for exemptions based on recognition/validation of prior learning, founded in the Act for Higher Education in § 3-5, second part.

These guidelines have two main objectives:

- to gather and spread more knowledge of RPL for exemptions
- to contribute to equal and fair practice and procedures for RPL for exemptions throughout the sector.

The guidelines are in line with the general principles presented in *European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning* from 2009.<sup>29</sup>

### Concepts

1. Prior Learning (PL) in Norway includes formal, non-formal and informal learning.<sup>30</sup>
2. In Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) the prior learning is validated against a set of standards from relevant, formal learning environments. In HE the PL is validated against standards defined in the specific institution's own learning outcomes. Exemptions are granted if the PL made visible by the applicant has the same value, both in quality and quantity, as the learning outcomes in the specific study programme which the claim addresses.
3. Granting exemptions for parts of a study programme implies that the institution accepts the applicant's competence from prior learning as similar and of equal worth as the learning outcomes of the course or parts of the programme in question. The applicant may be given full exemption from the relevant subject and be awarded study points.  
Alternatively, the applicant may be awarded leave from certain obligatory activities but must participate in the normal assessment at the end of the relevant course, to be awarded study points.  
Exemptions may be given at all levels and for both small parts of study programmes (subjects) or for the whole programme.
4. Documentation of PL: RPL for exemption is based on documentation proving the applicant's competence. Types of documentation and assessment methods may vary,

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28 [http://www.vox.no/PageFiles/17823/Fritak\\_UHsektoren\\_Veiledning.pdf](http://www.vox.no/PageFiles/17823/Fritak_UHsektoren_Veiledning.pdf)

29 CEDEFOP (2009): *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*. Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg 2009  
<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/5059.aspx>

30 Nasjonalt kvalifikasjonsrammeverk for livslang læring (NKR), vedlegg 2, tabell 1:  
<http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/KD/Vedlegg/Kompetanse/NKR2011mvedlegg.pdf>

due to different demands in different study programmes. Different types of documentation may be:

- certificates or other written documentation from non-formal courses or from workplace training.
- recommendations or other proofs from employer.
- products made by the applicant, such as texts, work of art or other products of work.
- oral presentations.
- presentation of practical skills.
- portfolio, with a mixture of different products made by the applicant.

5. Learning outcomes: in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) learning outcomes are described as ‘what a person knows, can do and is capable of doing as a result of a learning process’. Learning outcomes include knowledge, skills and general competence.<sup>31</sup>

#### *Common European principles*

These guidelines are based on the principles described in the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning.<sup>32</sup> This means, RPL should be:

- reliable
- valid
- safe, secure and confidential
- based on agreed standards/referentials
- visible/transparent
- fit for purpose
- cost efficient

#### *Roles – who does what*

The table presents an outline of roles and tasks. Cooperation between the different participants is important to secure successful processes. This can be used as a checklist in development of local practices.

| <b>Applicant</b>  | <b>Administrative staff</b>              | <b>Scientific staff</b>                     |
|---|--|---|
| <b>Information and guidance</b>   |  |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- collect relevant information &amp; guidance</li> <li>- decide to which subject / study programme to apply for exemption</li> </ul> | provide information and general guidance | Provide guidance on scientific requirements |

31 Nasjonalt kvalifikasjonsrammeverk for livslang læring (NKR), vedlegg 2, tabell 1: <http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/KD/Vedlegg/Kompetanse/NKR2011mvedlegg.pdf>

32 CEDEFOP (2009): *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*. Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg 2009, kapittel 6.1 og vedlegg 6, tabell 4

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <b>Documentation</b>  |  |   |
| Collect and produce documentation   | provide information and guidance   | Clarify scientific requirements for documentation<br><br>Provide relevant tasks for applicants, meant to make competence visible<br><br>Provide scientific guidance |
| <b>Administrative processing</b>  |  |   |
| Be available, if need for adjustment of application / more documentation etc. | Receive application<br><br>Ask for more documentation, if necessary<br><br>Convey the completed documentation to scientific staff for assessment | Receive application and documentation from administrative staff<br><br>Ask for more/other documentation, if necessary   |
| <b>Assessment</b>   |  |   |
| Be available for interviews or other types of dialogue                        | Cooperate with scientific staff on facilitating assessment   | Assess against set, scientific criteria<br><br>Propose a conclusion, based on the assessment  |
| <b>Administrative decision</b>  |  |   |
| Receive the decision  | Receive proposal from scientific staff and produce the administrative decision<br><br>Convey the administrative decision to the applicant        |   |
| <b>Complaint</b>  |  |   |
| Bring forward a complaint in due time, if necessary                           | process the complaint  | Participate in processing the complaint   |
| <b>Evaluation</b>   |  |   |
| Evaluate the process, if requested  | Request evaluation from the student<br><br>Evaluate, and change practice, if needed  | Evaluate, and change practice, if needed  |

### *Information and guidance*

The purpose of information and guidance is to make the applicant ready to

- choose the right subject/study programme from which to seek exemption
- understand how to put together an application
- be able to put together an application, with relevant and sufficient documentation

Important elements might be:

- easily accessible rules for RPL towards exemption
- criteria for exemption; what is required to be given exemption (study plans, description of learning outcomes and likewise)
- criteria for documentation
- application form
- time frames and time limits, if relevant
- consequences linked to exemption; lack of grading, effect on study financing (loans and grants)
- tools for documentation

### *Application with documentation*

An application must be followed by documentation describing the applicant's relevant competence.

Regardless of the format of documentation, what is assessed is what the applicant has learned, understands and is able to perform. A certificate, for instance, may describe the content of a course, but may say very little about the competence of its holder.

### *Guidelines for documentation*

To support equal and fair procedures in the institutions, internal guidelines for documentation may be effective. Principles for documentation may require a proof of the applicant's competence as:

- being relevant for the chosen subject
- being at the right level
- being of adequate width or depth

The guidelines can also specify:

- how to describe competence from working life or the voluntary sector (describe tasks, duration of specific tasks, learning outcomes, etc.)
- how to make the documentation valid (e.g. must be signed by employer or teacher)
- the necessary content of non-formal certification (description of subjects and level, learning outcomes, signature from responsible party)

### *Special requirements*

Some study programme may have special requirements, for instance demanding supervised practice periods as part of the study programme. The guidelines for documentation may specify how these requirements should be met.

### *Documenting as a learning process*

Documenting competence may be a learning process. The institutions may suggest that the applicant writes a specific paper, gives a presentation or takes part in discussions of a chosen subject.

The institutions may also facilitate cooperation and support between applicants by letting them develop their respective documentation as a group. It may bring forward more competence from each applicant as they inspire and challenge each other, and discuss alternative views of what kind of competence they have actually developed during their work experience. They may also support each other in writing reflection notes, collecting certification, preparing presentations or preparing for interviews.

### *Administrative processing*

Applications for exemptions are processed according to normal administrative procedures in the institutions. Some steps, however, may be more challenging and will be mentioned briefly in these guidelines.

### *Collecting adequate documentation*

The applicant is responsible for providing adequate documentation to support the application. The administration is responsible for giving the applicant relevant information and support during the application process and ensuring that the final application is good enough according to set criteria. The applicant is more likely to succeed in the RPL process if the follow-up of the administration during the application process is supportive and relevant.

Prior learning may also be documented orally by a dialogue or an interview.

### *Cooperation between administrative and scientific staff*

These types of applications presuppose cooperation between administrative and scientific staff to be sure that relevant competences have been adequately documented.

Applications may need

- more elaboration of documentation already given
- other documentation than already given
- additional dialogue with applicant

Either administrative staff or scientific staff may contact the applicant, depending on what kind of problem that needs solving.

### *Assessment*

When the application is sufficiently documented, often by cooperation between administrative and scientific staff, as described above, the application is conveyed to scientific staff for assessment.

Prior learning is assessed toward learning outcomes described in study plans for the relevant subject. An applicant may seek exemption from one or several subjects in a study programme, or for the whole study programme.

Criteria for assessment are found in the plans for the subject or study programme. These plans may include:

- admission requirements
- learning outcomes
- content and structure of the course
- working methods
- expected work effort
- assessment methods
- syllabus

Descriptions of learning outcomes may be very detailed and specific for some subjects and more general for others. The scientific staff may discuss and clarify how PL may be assessed against the relevant learning outcomes. They may decide how to assess the applicant's competence toward the overall aims of the subject and whether, in the more detailed assessment, some learning outcomes are more important than others.

Overall criteria may be:

- Is scientific breadth and depth covered for?
- Is demand for reflection covered for?
- Is the applicant's competence similar to what a normal student is expected to achieve, even though it is not identical?
- Is the applicant's competence adequate compared to the minimum level required to pass the exam?

### *Administrative decision*

The administrative decision is based on the scientific assessment provided by the scientific staff. Further proceedings follow regulations given in the Administration Act and in procedures decided locally in each institution.

Two details are:

- **Registration of results:** Exemptions based on prior learning may be registered as such in the normal administrative registration system for students to make it traceable for possible analysis.
- **Diploma:** Exemptions are not graded. Exemptions based on prior learning are entered as «exempted» in the diploma.

### *Exemption declined*

If the application is declined, the declination statement must state the reasons, according to the Administration Act. Thorough reasoning may give the applicant a basis for developing a new application for exemption.

- Complaints following the final decision are processed according to the same routines as other administrative decisions.
- Internal evaluation is an important part of quality development in the institutions. Internal routines for evaluation and quality development linked to assessment procedures for exemption should also be implemented, including who is responsible for following up weaknesses that are revealed in the process.

### *Meetings and networks*

The institutions can facilitate meetings and networks to enhance discussion and further development linked to RPL for exemption. Relevant subjects to discuss may be:

- What is sufficient documentation, how to collect it and how to describe competence
- Methods for assessment
- How to assess similarity/equality against learning outcomes
- Assessment practice
- Complaints
- Follow-up after granting exemption
- Minimum standards – ‘What is good enough?’

### *Assessment methods*

Assessment of prior learning for exemption in HE are individual processes where the assessment methods may vary depending on each applicant and each study programme or subject. In these guidelines different methods of assessment are described briefly. They may be used independently or in combination, according to what is most effective for the kind of competence that is to be assessed. A combination of methods may reveal more of the applicant’s competences.

All the presented methods must result in a *written assessment* from the scientific assessor, to be used as documentation and basis for the administrative decision.

*Assessment based on written documentation* is very often used. Competence not described in writing may consequently be challenging to assess. But tacit knowledge may be revealed and described in writing if the applicant is conscious of his/her own competence and the learning outcomes toward which to assess are described clearly:

- a. *Written assignment on a given topic*: the applicant may be given a written assignment on a topic relevant for the learning outcomes. In such cases it is vital that the assignment clearly states what learning outcomes the assignment is meant to address, to enable the applicant to present a text that is good enough to be assessed against the relevant learning outcomes.

- b. *Reflection notes*: this is a variety of the written assignment presented above. The objective of this task is to reveal the applicant's ability to reflect on his/her own work-related practice and hence use scientific theory in a practical context.
- c. *Portfolio*: portfolio assessment is based on a collection of products produced by the applicant. The collection may be a result of previous works from different jobs or leisure activities, or may partly be the result of a process during the application period. A portfolio may present a broad spectrum of the applicant's competences.

Assessment based on oral presentations may be used exclusively or in combination with written documentation. An oral presentation can be used to assess both scientific competence and oral presentation skills. Oral presentations may be especially suited for revealing tacit knowledge.

As a result of oral presentations, the assessor should write a short summary to serve as documentation for the following assessment. The applicant should be given the opportunity to comment on the summary:

- a. *Dialogue*: some institutions emphasise the importance of having a dialogue with the applicant to assess tacit knowledge. Prior to the dialogue it is necessary that the assessor has read the written documentation that follows the application, to be able to reveal possible gaps in the applicant's competence compared to learning outcomes in the relevant subject. These gaps will normally be the main topic of the dialogue. The applicant should be informed of the main topic of the dialogue prior to the event.
- b. *Interview*: an interview is a structured dialogue with more or less set questions. An interview can be set up to assess specific competence and may be an effective method compared to the more informal dialogue. The applicant must be informed of the topic in advance and must be given time to prepare for the interview.
- c. *Oral presentation*: some subjects have oral communication and presentation as important learning outcomes. In these subjects it is especially relevant to ask the applicant to prepare and perform a presentation on a given subject.

*Assessment based on practice*. In some subjects it is relevant to assess the applicant's performance in practice:

- a. *Observation*: one or more assessors may observe the applicant in a working situation. Other practical tasks may be to prepare (and perform) a lecture, a concert, an exhibition, a marketing plan etc.
- b. *Simulations*: practical abilities may be assessed under simulated working conditions. Many HEIs have access to simulation equipment and they may be used when assessing applicants towards exemptions.

### **Piloting to conclude**

Vox allocated funding to four pilot projects in 2013 to try out procedures for VPL toward exemptions. Five HEIs participated:

- Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) and Sør-Trøndelag University College (HiST)
- University of Nordland (UiN)
- Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences (HiOA)
- Telemark University College (HiT)

The projects experienced different challenges. One project had to make a lot of effort to clarify and operationalise criteria for validation based on their study programmes.

Another project found it difficult to recruit students who wanted to be validated.

The overall challenges in making VPL work for exemptions in higher education were:

- For the students: to collect relevant and sufficient documentation.
- To establish a common agreement among the practitioners on how to validate against learning outcomes.
- To develop awareness and understanding of competence from other learning arenas among staff.
- To implement effective routines in the institutions.

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#### Introduction

We live in an age in which knowledge is becoming increasingly quickly outdated, the intensity of knowledge is growing and methods of learning and working are changing and becoming ever so complex. In this knowledge society it's up to everyone to acquire new knowledge and skills efficiently and effectively. In this setting interest is slowly but surely giving more attention to the high value of soft' factors, the human capital besides 'hard' production factors such as machines and instruments. Of primary interest is human learning potential, capacity and flexibility, i.e. their employment potential. It makes no difference whether one is working, learning or seeking employment. The focus is on the degree in which you can be employed in and around the labour market and in other contributions that can be made to the society, such as voluntary work and private life.

In this contribution the way in which VPL as a tool for and as well as a vision on lifelong learning strategies is introduced in the historical and cultural setting of *the Netherlands* is described and analysed. While describing the features of development and implementation of VPL in the Dutch setting, not only the necessity to contextualize VPL in order to make it an effective approach and tool in lifelong learning strategies becomes apparent but also the way of doing this in a national learning culture with its specific systems, institutes and critical success factors. The Netherlands presents itself in this way as a case of VPL in itself since it's from the start geared at integrating VPL in running processes of national and sector systems for learning (education, training) and working (human resources management and development). Looking top-down at this integral approach, a good overview is provided of the many responsibilities that need to be filled-in for using VPL to its full potential. The bottom-up view however gives a different outlook on the real, practical issues for opening up VPL to the users themselves, both in qualitative as well as in quantitative terms. In other words, the case of VPL in the Netherlands from above looks fairly well organised. From the working floor of VPL however the image is quite different and raises a few fundamental questions related to opening up and making use of VPL.

## 1. Setting the scene for Dutch VPL<sup>33</sup>

A national system for validation of non-formal and informal learning in the Netherlands started up in 1998. Under the umbrella-term 'EVC' – which stands for '*Erkenning van Verworven Competenties*' or in English 'Validation of Prior Learning' - such validation was [and still is] intended to take stock of existing knowledge and skills: in other words, rather than being half empty, Dutch VPL takes the view that the glass is half full! This motto is based on a number of basic principles underlying this kind of VPL:

- VPL recognises the fact that learning on the job or via other non-formal 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 on the basis of a generally recognised standard, such as the qualification structure for professional 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.
- VPL is not a goal in itself. It contributes to the desire to develop individuals and to strengthen human capital management within companies. It is an important means for realising permanent labour market suitability and deployability.
- 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 acts as a reliable yardstick for determining which skills and qualifications the individual employee already has. Based on this inventory, a tailor-made training or development path is formulated.
- 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 existing skills and qualifications in order to be able subsequently to come to a decision about the investments needed in training.
- VPL-procedures make it possible to visualise the profitability of training by expressing the results of training efforts in terms of a general standard. As when calculating the value of other economic production factors, the identification of the value of skills and qualifications assumes a common and reliable standard in which this value is expressed.
- The provision of flexible or customised training courses assumes that we can gauge a person's existing skills level. VPL can also improve the match between education and the labour market. This applies especially in the case of skills-related training.
- The VPL assessment is designed to assess professional activities. The assessment results provide valuable feedback on the content and methods of the formal

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33 Based on the case studies with selected target groups for the ALLinHE-project and on the making of the Dutch report for the EU 2014 Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning ([www.cedefop.europa.eu](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu)).

learning paths. The training courses are given direct information about the degree to which they succeed in adequately preparing their students for professional practice. This effect is strengthened by the fact that a distinction is made between training and assessment.

### *Three approaches*

The VPL-system in the Netherlands evolved into a threefold approach:

- RPL: recognising prior learning – a formal procedure that leads to the award of a validated portfolio or '*Ervaringsprofiel*',
- APL: accrediting prior learning – a formal procedure in which a candidate can get accreditation of his/her learning outcomes measured against a qualification standard ('*Ervaringscertificaat*'), and
- VPL: validating prior learning - the umbrella-term that includes all forms of validation: the two formal ones already mentioned, but also the informal use of VPL by anyone or any organization when trying to link someone's prior learning outcomes to more than a formalized lifelong learning perspective, such as a job-promotion, transition from work-to-work, validation as a volunteer, etc.

So, when the term 'VPL' is used, it can mean a formalised form of VPL or a more open, informal use of VPL as an instrument for a diversity of lifelong learning perspectives. The '*Ervaringsprofiel*' and the '*Ervaringscertificaat*' are formal certificates that can only be awarded if they are carried out by accredited 'EVC-suppliers'. These certificates are used to assess and recognise the competences (both vocational and general) of a candidate in relation to sectoral standards (branch or sector qualification), MBO (VET qualification), HBO (HE qualification awarded by universities of applied sciences) and the Open University.

Candidates for the *Ervaringsprofiel* or the *Ervaringscertificaat* can use these certificates in two ways:

- as an independent document, as the basis for further informal or non-formal learning and for career development;
- to obtain exemptions in learning programmes and a partial/full qualification. The *Ervaringscertificaat* can be used by the candidate to request exemptions from the exam committee of a body awarding a qualification. Awarding bodies then decide on whether to grant the exemptions. In theory, a full qualification can be granted if the applicant proved his/her learning outcomes are in line with the expected learning outcomes for this qualification.

Different phases in the development of the validation system in the Netherlands can be distinguished:

- Until 2006, the main objective was to encourage the take up of VPL. Government, schools/colleges/universities and social partners (trade unions and employers) focused on creating favorable circumstances for developing and implementing EVC 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.

- From 2006 a greater focus was put on quality assurance to increase the accessibility, transparency and to guarantee the summative effects by means of certification or qualification. The role of the *Kenniscentrum EVC* changed from the overall responsibility for all features of VPL to supporting the quality-focus and focus explicitly on APL instead of VPL (see the introduction on this terminology, p. 26).
- Since 2013, a new change of strategy for validation is taking place in relation with the government's drive to move towards 'a participation-society' in which all stakeholders have to take ownership and responsibility for their own role in (lifelong) learning. Focus will be on using VPL as a formalised instrument for Validation of Learning Outcomes linked to not only national qualifications but also too sector standards (sector level training, or in Dutch post-initial or non-formal learning). This means an enlargement of the scope of the two formal terms '*Ervaringsprofiel*' and '*Ervaringscertificaat*'. The new policy is expected to be presented in early 2014 and should broaden validation opportunities for Dutch citizens. The outcome of this reorientation is closely linked to making EVC a successful tool in both learning and working processes and is aiming at sharing ownership of the method and its instruments, such as the portfolio, the assessment and validation.

### **National perspective on validating learning outcomes**

There is an important difference in the definition of formal, informal and non-formal learning between the Netherlands and the EU. This difference relates to the Dutch learning culture in which a strong focus on nationally accredited diplomas or certificates traditionally has had dominance over the learning taking place in sectors or organisations (Lenssen, 2011). This has a lot to do with the so-called 'polder-model' in which harmonising the interests of authorities, employers and trade unions are constantly negotiated. This led and leads to 'political bargaining' on social and economic issues in which the role of education is divided into a responsibility for initial education (the government) and post-initial education ('the market').

*Table: Formal, Non-formal and Informal Learning in the Netherlands and the EU*

|                 | NL   | EU   |
|-----------------|--|--|
| Formal Learning | ... is education that leads to a nationally accredited diploma or certificate. | ... occurs in an organised and structured context (in a school/training centre or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Formal learning is intentional from the |

|                     | NL   | EU   |
|---------------------|--|--|
|                     |  | learner's point of view. It typically leads to qualification or certification  |
| Non-formal learning | ... is education that doesn't lead to a nationally recognised diploma or certificate but to a diploma or certificate that is accredited by a professional group or sector. | ... is learning which is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support), but which contain an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It normally does not lead to certification |
| Informal learning   | ... is experiential learning that occurs 'by doing' or by learning on the job.   | ... is learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organised or structured (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner's perspective. It typically does not lead to certification                               |

Sources: SER 2012, Cedefop 2009

## Legal framework, system, policy and transitions

### National policy

The publication of *De Fles is Half Vol!* ("The glass is half full!") in 2000, was the first step towards lifelong learning using the Validation of Prior Learning in the Netherlands. With the change of focus to the quality-assurance of EVC in 2006, the Dutch government started to stimulate and subsidise the development of a national infrastructure for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. For this reason the Interdepartmental Project Unit for Learning & Working (PLW) was set up. The aim in 2014 is still to boost adult learning in combination with work, without focusing specifically on one or more key skills, but rather on programmes combining work and study that lead to a qualification and better opportunities in the job market. The *Ervaringscertificaat* is used to assess and recognise prior learning competences against formal qualification standards. This upgrade from APL to VPL in 2014 is expected to broaden the perspective EVC brings to the Dutch citizens.

### *National system*

In 2000, a national working group on validation of prior learning formulated a broad vision on VPL and the implementation process. VPL had to bridge the gap between the supply of education and the demand on the labour market side. The challenge was to connect these two worlds via the learner, on the one hand by converting learning experiences into certificates or diplomas, and on the other by allowing for the development of competences in a career context (Werkgroep EVC, 2000). To support implementation, the government established the Knowledge Centre on Validation of Prior Learning in 2001 (*Kenniscentrum EVC*).

### *Legal Framework*

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

- The Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector, the Law on Adult & Vocational Education (WEB, 1996) was the first law in which the basis was laid for what later in 1998 was formally developed as VPL-policy in the Netherlands.
- 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 institutes are left free to translate this regulation per study in the "*Onderwijs en examenreglementen*" (OERs - rules on education and exams).

Apart from using EVC as an instrument for awarding exemptions for higher 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. There are a number of institutions that state that an EVC procedure can be used to replace this test.

It is important to note that the use of EVC is only possible in higher vocational education (HBO) and not in universities, apart from the Open University.

As explained in the introduction, validation of non-formal and informal learning in the Netherlands consists of two formal instruments:

- The '*Ervaringscertificaat*'. This is the formal procedure in which a candidate can get accreditation of his/her learning outcomes when measured against a national qualification standard. It is a summative approach; a portfolio is referred to a specific national qualification standard and the accreditation consists of a number of credits that can be cashed in at a qualifying institute or school. This form can be called *Accreditation of Prior Learning* (EVC). The outcome – the *Ervaringscertificaat* – is not the award itself but an official certificate with the described competences that can be awarded by the exam committee of the chosen standard. Therefore, in the Netherlands there is a kind of a firewall between accrediting prior learning outcomes and awarding the accredited

learning outcomes in terms of exemptions for a qualification or for a full qualification.

- The '*Ervaringsprofiel*'. This procedure sets up a personal portfolio. It is a formative approach aimed at validation of all the generic competences of a candidate. It advises on the possible opportunities for accreditation or personal development steps. It also points out what to do when a specific qualification or diploma is at stake. This form can be called *Recognition of Prior Learning* (RPL, or in Dutch HVC or *Herkennen van Verworven Competenties*).

### *Transitions*

As mentioned in the introduction, since 2013, Dutch society is officially moving towards 'a participation-society' in which all stakeholders have to take ownership and responsibility for their own role. The authorities take care of the individuals and groups that need special attention. Social partners focus on their labour market responsibilities. In line with this, the national strategy towards VPL is changing in 2013. The focus in the government's role will change towards overseeing the quality of and access to VPL towards a system focusing on validating learning outcomes for three VPL-perspectives:

1. VPL for formally validating a personal portfolio, without linking it directly to a national qualification standard.
2. VPL for career steps on the labour market and access to non-formal training (sector standards).
3. VPL for career steps aiming at formal learning (national qualifications)

This broad focus on the formalised use of VPL entails a major change in the national strategy, since with this triple focus the balance of responsibilities in a multi-stakeholder involvement in VPL can differ, the learning objectives as supported by VPL can also differ and the outcome of VPL can have both a formal and non-formal learning impact (further learning). These three forms of VPL can be considered as different kinds of skills audits since they focus on the validation of prior - formal, non-formal and informal - learning outcomes for the reason of finding out if there is a possible link between a personal learning biography and a social-economic purpose in society. In the Netherlands it would be better to speak of a competences-audit since competences embrace skills, knowledge and attitude as denominators.

### **Relationship with qualifications and credit systems**

#### *Qualifications and qualifications frameworks*

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science commissioned in 2011 the development of the Dutch Qualifications Framework (NLQF) that was constructed in close cooperation with experts and stakeholders in the field of education and training. The National Coordination Point (NCP) of the NLQF is an independent body that is responsible for the development and implementation of the NLQF.

The NLQF aims to facilitate student and labour market mobility by providing an insight into the levels of all qualifications recorded by the NCP NLQF in the NCP register. The

NLQF provides transparency in that it facilitates a comparison of qualification levels nationally and, thus, national mobility ([www.nlqf.nl](http://www.nlqf.nl)). 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 (basic education) and Level 8 the most complex (Master's degree). The NLQF is referenced to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

The NCP records Government-regulated qualifications (the qualifications of the Ministries of Education Culture and Sciences; Healthcare, Welfare and Sports and Economics Affairs; Food and Natural and Living Environment) in the NCP Register of qualifications. All other qualifications are first assessed and level-determined by the NCP and then recorded in the Register.

All courses in vocational secondary education are entered in the Central Register of Vocational Courses (*CREBO, Centraal Register Beroepsopleidingen*). This register records which institutions provide which courses, what the exit qualifications are, which learning pathway is involved and which of the partial qualifications awarded are subject to external validation. It also indicates which courses are funded by the government and which bodies are authorised to validate examinations. The CREBO encompasses all NLQF-levels from 1-4.

All accredited programmes in higher education are listed in the Central Register of Higher Education Study Programmes (*CROHO, Centraal Register Opleidingen Hoger Onderwijs*). The CROHO encompasses all NLQF-levels from 5-8.

There is a strong link between VPL and the national qualifications framework in terms of validating skills and competences. The qualifications framework also offers providers of qualifications, which are not regulated by the Government, the possibility of having such training programmes and qualifications classified at a level of the NLQF. Procedures and criteria for this process are in place.

### *Credit systems*

With the implementation of the NLQF, students in VET and HE will have additional opportunities for linking in to the levels of the national qualifications framework by means of their further, post-initial learning. This is important because it gives their initial qualification an internationally recognized level, but also the support for managing their own lifelong learning, by giving an opportunity to recognise learning experiences which have taken place since the completion of formal schooling on the framework, assisted by the validation methodology of VPL.

Awarding credits for exemptions in terms of modules or qualifications, therefore depends first of all on the purpose of engaging into an VPL-procedure – for initial qualification or for post-initial purposes like updating/upgrading a qualification-level or even for accounting for formative career steps - and secondly on opportunities for credits offered by the VET-school or the university. The latter depends primarily on the way they have built up their curriculum: modularised or concentric. In modularised curricula exemptions are easier to award than in concentric curricula.

### *Standards*

In the context of learning and working, an VPL-procedure 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 the Open University) qualification. This assessment results in an *Ervaringscertificaat*. This certificate can be used as an independent document that proves the value of the experiences measured in terms of a qualification. Candidates are free to choose what they want to do with their certificate and cannot be obliged to follow any education afterwards.

As mentioned above, the NCP records all government-regulated qualifications in a Register of qualifications. All other qualifications are first assessed and level determined by the NCP and then recorded in the Register. The NCP opens up - in theory - all standards (national and sectoral) and makes it possible to link them to personal formal, non-formal and informal learning outcomes that are validated and reported in an *Ervaringscertificaat*.

Qualifications in branches, VET and HE (only bachelors of professional universities-HBO) are translated into competences and for each qualification put into an APL-procedure. Notably, VET is based on a learning outcomes approach in theory. This is called the competence-base of VET in which all national standards embedded in VET are formulated in terms of competences. In January 2012 the final step was taken in turning VET into a vocational-oriented learning system based on skills and competences (Wetten, 2012).

In theory, a full diploma can be granted on the basis of VPL, if the applicant can prove his/her learning outcomes are in line with the expected learning outcomes of a diploma. In practice this is very difficult for schools and universities to facilitate. For VET-schools there are better chances for candidates to get access to and exemptions for a specific programme, because VET is based on a national qualification system in which all diplomas are based on the same competences all across the country. For universities it is different, due to their autonomy to design their own learning pathways for obtaining the nationally agreed learning outcomes.

In many sectors VPL is part of the human resources management (HRM) approach. The focus lies on sustainable employability and mobility of labour. The use of VPL is strongly linked to these initiatives in which sector programmes for non-formal learning are used as standards in the VPL-process. The next step in this process is making links between national and sector standards through the Dutch Qualifications Framework (NLQF).

### **National Institutional Framework**

The *Kenniscentrum EVC*, after its initial role in stimulating the development and implementation of VPL, is momentarily the main institution responsible for supporting the Quality Code for EVC (based on a national covenant). Since June 2012 a national tripartite covenant, signed by the Ministry of Education, the trade unions and the

employers' organisations broadened the tasks allocated to the *Kenniscentrum* (Staatscourant, 2012). As well as its quality assurance role, outlined in the Quality Code for EVC, the new covenant sets out objectives relating to stimulating the actual usage of VPL, to implement VPL as a labour market and guidance tool and to incorporate sector standards as well in the VPL-process. The covenant offers a national framework for the further design and implementation of validation. Both government and social partners take responsibility for the development of VPL.

The scope of the Quality Code has been extended, since the summative use (i.e. the qualification-approach of the *Ervaringscertificaat*) of VPL now not only links personal portfolios to standards in VET or HE but also to sector standards or qualifications. In this way VPL focuses on awarding exemptions and offers access to qualifications that are recognised on the labour market. This access both affects public funded as well as private funded education, as long as they supply national accredited standards in VET and HE.

In order to keep track of national and international developments concerning the Quality Code, the validation of sector standards and the implementation as a labour market and guidance tool in the Register of the NCP, the covenant partners organise an annual meeting with the other national stakeholders in education, training and career guidance.

## **Allocation of responsibilities and roles in the process**

### *Responsibilities*

Responsibilities are divided amongst a diversity of stakeholders:

- The government focuses on the infrastructure and on the quality of VPL and the VPL system. The government stimulates the use of VPL with a communication campaign on the *Ervaringscertificaat*, a fiscal facility for VPL, the *Kenniscentrum EVC*, platforms with experts and companies, research and broadening the scope of VPL. With the exception of the fiscal facility, these tasks are shared with the social partners (the 'covenant-partners').
- The social partners in the Netherlands traditionally negotiate with the government on all aspects concerning the regulation of the labour market. This includes division of responsibilities in the learning market; initial education and training of jobseekers are the primary responsibility of the government and the training of employees is the primary responsibility of the social partners. This therefore also affects the introduction of VPL-systems for employees and job-seekers.

The social partners are so-called 'covenant-partners', meaning they take responsibility together with the government for promoting and maintaining a high quality national system of VPL.

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 valuation of personal competences of employees. 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. house painting industry, meat industry, construction industry, process industry, education, public services, the care sector), have set up initiatives regarding VPL at their (sector) level. In most cases social partners, sector organisations and accredited VPL-providers are involved in setting up VPL-procedures.

- The education associations (The Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (*Vereniging Hogescholen*), the Netherlands Association of Vocational Education and Training Centres (*MBO-raad*), the Council for Agricultural Education Centres (*AOC-raad*) and the Open University stimulate the use and the quality of the *Ervaringscertificaat*.
- The Foundation for Cooperation on Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market - *Stichting Samenwerking Beroepsonderwijs Bedrijfsleven (SBB)* steers the agreements on the degree requirements of VET which are set out in qualification dossiers. Educational institutions in VET base their qualifications on these dossiers. The dossiers are used for tasks in vocational guidance, formulating vocational training (internships) and linking in to the *ervaringscertificaat*.

### *Roles in the process*

The roles to be filled in in the process are divided amongst different stakeholders:

#### A. Providers of VPL

When registered in the Quality Code for VPL, any organisation may offer VPL-procedures that can lead to a formal *Ervaringscertificaat*. This registration process entails a number of steps concerning the quality of the process offered, the quality of involved staff, the independence of the organisation (Kenniscentrum EVC 2006):

1. The goal of VPL 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, VPL 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 VPL-offering organizations are clearly defined.
3. Procedure and instruments are reliable and based on solid standards Trust is the key issue. Trust 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 procedures is guaranteed and is being improved continuously. The quality of the APL procedure and the set of instruments used in the procedure are guaranteed. Evaluations are conducted regularly. The results are incorporated into improvement actions.

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

#### B. Formal education and training sector

Any official VPL-procedure results in an *Ervaringscertificaat*. This certificate describes and grounds the advice of the assessors concerning the value of someone's portfolio related to the chosen standard in the VPL-procedure. The candidate can use this report to ask the exam committee of an institute (school, university, training institute) either to access a learning programme, to obtain exemptions or to receive a full certificate or diploma.

In VET and Higher Education, the autonomous institutions decide for themselves how to use the results of VPL-procedures (the extent to which these results lead to exemptions or a diploma). The government plays no part in this, but does ensure that the procedures meet quality assurance standards.

#### C. Private sector

Thanks to VPL, in almost all sectors, recruitment and selection of personnel is increasingly also covering target groups without the formal requirements. VPL is also used to address formative issues such as retention of personnel or outplacement (from 'work to work') and employability.

The role of the private sector in VPL is related to activities such as financing and raising awareness within sectors and companies or acting as VPL-providers.

Training Funds often finance agreements on VPL. Both employees and employers pay a small amount of their incomes to these sector funds, which were originally set up to support educational initiatives for employees (Duvekot et al, 2005).

In addition, private sector institutions may just like public institutions offer VPL if they are registered as an VPL provider with the Knowledge Centre and adhere to the quality code. There are currently 69 organisations providing VPL (Register EVC, 2013).

Outflow and outplacement of personnel also benefit from validation. For instance in the military there is a high proportion of employees with fixed-term appointments. To be more successful at placing these employees on the labour market, VPL can offer both development and qualification. Likewise, in mergers and reorganisations, VPL offers development and qualifications to find the right place for personnel, whether internally or externally.

An example of a VPL-initiative in the private sector, based on a multi-stakeholder collaboration, is provided by the *Rockwool Group* in Roermond, the Netherlands. Rockwool is the world's leading supplier of innovative products and systems based on stone wool. Since the 1990s, human resources development is a key element in the corporate policy of Rockwool. In the plant in Roermond this policy can be regarded as an on-going process of linking learning and working for each individual employee by means of competence-steered assessment methods and work-based development-programmes:

- Assessment is considered as a summative and a formative method for enhancing performance of not only the employees for the company but also of the company for the employees.
- Learning goals are oriented towards employability and qualification on the one hand for strengthening the working-processes, and on the other hand for creating empowerment and opening up internal/external career-opportunities for the employees.
- Development is focused on facilitating learning trajectories that are beneficial for employability, personal development and internal/external career-steps of the employees.
- EVC is the method for linking the potential of employees with the need for competences. It is utilised as a multi-targeted method for sustainable HRM.

On October 15, 2013 Rockwool was awarded in Brussels *the Observal-Net European Prize for Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning*, in the category of Work Based Competence Development and Recognition. [<http://www.observal-net.eu/validation-prize>]

Private sector stakeholders play an important role in the implementation of validation in the Netherlands. A number of key learning points can be identified from experience to date in this sector:

- Collaboration between companies and educational establishments is essential to ensure that work-based learning can be customised following the VPL-procedure. Companies have to facilitate and in particular provide guidance in workplace learning, and educational establishments must accept and value the workplace as a learning environment.
- Employees need to be as self-reliant and programme-independent as possible in the development of their personal development programmes following an 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. These choices range between 100 % self-determination of form and content of the programme (*empowerment*) and 0 % (*pampering*).
- A more customer-centred orientation of education institutions towards organisations/businesses is promoted by the ministry in order to help anchor VPL in Human Resource Development. On the other hand, increased formulation of

demands is needed from organisations/businesses in order to help anchor VPL in the policy of educational institutions (Beleidsreactie, 2012).

- 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 by Rockwool, the sector of municipalities and the agricultural sector.
- Research is needed into the added value of VPL, among other things focussed on its economic, financial and social effects and also the relation with other assessment systems (e.g. in-company, social, etc.). (Observal-Net, 2012)

#### D. The *third* sector

The Netherlands Centre for Social Development, MOVISIE (in their capacity as research institute for the voluntary sector), developed an VPL-procedure for volunteers. The VPL-procedure consists of a portfolio for the volunteer and two manuals (one for the supervisor and one for the assessor). In addition MOVISIE developed a specific procedure for social relief workers.

MOVISIE also commissioned an intriguing research into the value of VPL for 'vulnerable volunteers'. It was found that VPL as a social intervention tool was successfully implemented for the target group of 'vulnerable volunteers' in society: people with a mental and/or physical vulnerability and who are at a considerable distance from the labour market (Michon, et al, 2013). Vulnerable people increase through voluntary work their employment opportunities. The general competences that they can bring into the picture, provide guidance and insight into their social and economic chances. People who go through the entire VPL-process score after 12 months high on various aspects of empowerment, such as hope and confidence. This leads to a more active attitude and openness to new challenges. With this method, volunteers prove what they are capable of.

#### **Coordination between stakeholders**

The effectiveness of the coordination between the stakeholders in VPL is strengthened with the EVC-Covenant of 2012. Coordination is also expected to be strengthened when the new policy with its focus on turning VPL into an instrument for Validation of Learning Outcomes on (1) national qualification level and on (2) sector level training, will be established. Several examples of national regional, local or EU funded initiatives show the various roads VPL is taking in the Netherlands.

#### *The building sector*

The building sector has taken full control of the VPL-process and VPL is an integral part of the sectoral career policy. Each employee, covered by the collective labour agreement for the sector, is entitled to a career-guided trajectory once every five years.

Besides that right, the employee also is allowed to use preferred suppliers of VPL-procedures at six VET-schools. Both the employee and the employer can take the initiative for implementing this offer. *Fundeon* – a member of the SBB for the sector – executes on behalf of the sector the VPL-procedures and ‘buys’ or arranges tailor-made learning services at the VET-schools or other affiliated training institutes for following up the advice of the VPL-procedures. Follow-up means filling in the remaining modules for qualification in the CREBO-register in order for the employees to update or upgrade their craftsmanship.

*Fundeon* supports the employees in the VPL-process and fills in the network of regional VET-schools or training institutes for the employees to fill in their tailor-made trajectories in their own region. *Fundeon* only allows learning services from schools and institutes that accept the *Ervaringscertificaat*. The teachers from the VET-schools act as assessors in the VPL-procedure. With that, *Fundeon* actually built up a community of practice in which the professionals from VPL providers and the teachers/trainer know and trust each other. (EVC in de markt, 2013).

#### *Police*

The police-organisation in the region Limburg-Noord developed, in cooperation with Fontys Hogescholen, an VPL-procedure on level 6 of the NLQF. It is used to obtain an overview of the skills and competences of its staff. VPL is operated mainly as a career tool. More insight into competences leads to more motivated people and has them making earlier and faster steps forward in their career. This career focus stems from a vision on working with generally accepted values such as ‘security’, ‘connectivity’ and ‘trust’. VPL is in this context used as an instrument in the area of competence-management of the local organizations/teams, for the development of annual interviews and career planning. Between 2007-2012 more than 150 police officers participated in an VPL-procedure.

Research into the function of VPL as a career tool clearly showed the difference in career progression between people with and without an *Ervaringscertificaat*. It seems very likely that VPL revealed some key competencies, and that this "transparency" effectuates itself into career steps. The opportunities they see for themselves in the labour market are clearly brighter than those of the employees who have no *Ervaringscertificaat*. The effect of the first VPL groups yielded a number of important recommendations (Profit Wise 2012):

1. Everyone who participates in an VPL-procedure should in principle receive an *Ervaringscertificaat*.
2. Employees clearly indicate that they would like to see VPL continued as an instrument for career-policy in the Police Corps, and that they greatly appreciate the involvement of the (direct) manager in their career-management. Guidance and evaluation is therefore in the interest of the organisation and the employees.

#### *Welfare sector*

The Welfare sector provides a good example of VPL embedded in HRM-policies of welfare-institutions. In 2011-2012 a pilot project on VPL and tailor-made learning was

initiated. The project focused on the mobility/promotion from group leader to senior group leader in the Welfare sector. Prior work experience and learning outcomes were assessed and recognised in an EVC procedure, using both sector standards as well as HE qualifications (Ervaring, 2012).

An examination committee of the university evaluated the VPL-report of the candidate that he/she obtained in the VPL-procedure as part of the intake for a qualification-programme (incl. portfolio and assessment). The aim of this evaluation was to either obtain directly the HE-qualification that is linked to the sector-standard for senior group leader or obtain a tailor-made learning programme, taking into account prior learning outcomes and filling in the remaining learning targets in the HE-programme.

Fifteen candidates from one youth care institute participated in the VPL-programme. Thirteen candidates from this group received a VPL-report (*'ervaringscertificaat'*). This report is the basis for programming further development and learning for the candidate. On top of this, the candidates could also receive a sector-certificate if they complied with all criteria in the sector-standard. Only one candidate received this certificate during the pilot-phase. The VPL-procedure was managed by a VPL-manager from the university, two portfolio-advisers (from the university and from the employer) and two assessors (internal-university and external-sector)

The exam committee from the department of Pedagogics acknowledged the sector-standard as a relevant standard to match with the HE-standard of Pedagogics, Bachelor degree, NLQF-level 6. A matrix for general comparison was designed and used by the exam committee.

Furthermore, all stakeholders also acknowledged the relevance and value of both standards (sector and national) and the steps in the VPL-process.

This project is interesting because it offers recognition in higher professional education qualifications for experienced youth workers. Furthermore, the use of VPL opens a wide HR-approach for a multiple targeted policy for employability (formative) and qualification (summative). This multiple-targeted VPL is used at the welfare-institute for linking two purposes:

1. the purpose of addressing an employee's learning needs (knowing how to invest best in yourself),
2. for creating horizontal and/or vertical employability chances (knowing where to come to your best).

#### *IVC Den Helder*

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 women to get a good grip on their personal skills and competences for the sake of empowerment and to find their way in Dutch society. The outcomes of the training can be used for setting up career opportunities in further learning, in volunteering and paid work and for embedding their personal life in a country with

different cultural customs. During the training the awareness of their personal values is strengthened.

The training is arranged according to the Swiss CH-Q method (a Swiss vocational qualifications programme that has developed tools to document skills). CH-Q follows the steps of the VPL-procedure: raising awareness, documentation, presentation, assessment and certification.

The main focus of CH-Q is to enable individuals to manage their own careers, articulate their own development needs and build up their own competencies.

After passing the training and presenting their personal action plan, the students receive an approved certificate. The CH-Q training has been offered since 2009 and is successfully continued every year (see [www.ch-q.nl](http://www.ch-q.nl) for more detail). The training is offered twice a year; since 2009 45 women participated in the training; of this group, many found jobs (paid and voluntary work) or started up a study programme at a VET-school or a university.

### **Flows of beneficiaries and benefits**

The number of *Ervaringscertificaten* has increased during the last few years, from 9,900 in 2007 to 12,500 in 2008 and 15,700 in 2009. This meant that in the period 2007-2009 the number of awarded *Ervaringscertificaten* grew by more than 60%. These quantitative data on the actual use of VPL in the Netherlands can be divided into two groups:

1. User groups at MBO-levels (VET-schools, branche or sector qualifications),
2. User groups at HBO-level (Universities of applied science).

The majority of these certificates were issued on MBO-levels, with an estimated percentage of 80-90%. The MBO user group uses the *Ervaringscertificaat* to obtain a diploma at an MBO-level, to get access to a MBO-diploma programme or to get access to and exemptions for an MBO-diploma-programme. The HBO user group uses the *Ervaringscertificaat* to obtain access to and exemptions for an HBO-diploma-programme (bachelor-level).

Factors that have stimulated demand for the *Ervaringscertificaat* are the interest of employees, government measures to stimulate demand and the interest of employers. The demand for the *Ervaringscertificaat* reached its highest number in 2010 with 22,300 VPL-procedures. This number dropped down to 17,900 in 2011 due to the crisis. (Ecorys, 2012). Since then the actual number has stabilized at this number ([www.kenniscentrumevc.nl](http://www.kenniscentrumevc.nl)).

The majority of all VPL – about 65% - was and is at the MBO-level of branch, or sector, qualifications. These qualifications are developed and accredited within the sector but are not part of the national (funded) qualification structure. VET and VET-related training (also MBO-levels or NLQF-levels 1-4) accounts for roughly 25% and VPL at universities of applied sciences for 10% of VPL in a year.

VPL leading to an *Ervaringscertificaat* can be used:

- as the basis for further informal or non-formal development of the individual,

- in the labour market for further career building,
- for a qualification through a diploma when the individual has met all the required learning outcomes that were defined for this qualification,
- as a document to get exemptions in education, if not all required learning outcomes were met and the individual does not wish to attend formal education and training again.

While the majority of providers in practice only conducts a summative VPL, a formative VPL can also be used in the context of career development with the aim of identifying training needs and adjusting training programmes accordingly. The benefits of VPL are considered high, especially when the VPL-process not only covers summative but also formative effects. Although the summative APL still holds its value, the formative VPL is slowly but gradually developing. State of the art research shows that the summative aims and (potential) benefits are still the main priority of both organisations as well as individuals (Profitwise, 2011; Ecorys, 2012; EVC in de markt, 2013), but the utilization of formative steered VPL is growing in importance. In general one can state that the role and value of VPL in the Netherlands is considered as being very valuable for objectives of (further) development of people in both learning and working contexts.

### **Information, advice and guidance**

Raising awareness of the necessity and opportunities of lifelong learning for individuals in any given context is at the heart of the process of Validating Learning. Without this, learning will remain school- or company-led and cannot effectively be based on individuals' motivations and ambitions.

Most of all, an individual has to be self-aware of his/her own competences, of the value he/she is giving him/herself to these competences and the value it has for others in certain contexts at certain moments. Being able to keep up your competences in a 'made-to-measure way' is vital for this understanding.

Especially the '*Ervaringsprofiel*' is used for generating motivation for looking into one's development so far and answering the question of what's the next step going to be in this development. This is for instance the core of a structured training for answering these two questions with the CH-Q System of Managing Competencies. This system is dedicated to strengthening links between the personal and professional development of young people and adults and their socio-economic integration. The overall objective is to enable them to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills of how to handle a sustainable career and life planning. This implies adequate training and guidance. The training concept is based on an extensive set of methods addressing all issues in career management. The solution oriented learning processes are centred on the identification, assessment and recognition of skills and competencies and they are backed up by accompanying instruments for young people and adults (print and electronic version). The latter include folders of competencies (portfolios), of qualifications (formal, informal evidences), of applications as well as special instruments to prepare validation and accreditation procedures. (Schuur 2011; [www.ch-q.nl](http://www.ch-q.nl))

For organisations it is vital to understand that investing in ‘their’ people also means investing in the goals of the own organisation. This awareness needs to culminate in setting specific targets for the investment in individuals and the support the organisation can give to this human resource development. Providing information is mainly performed at the bottom-level of learning- and working processes where informing the people for whom VPL is meant, comes to reality: workers, jobseekers, volunteers, ‘private lifers’, etc. In practice awareness-raising activities are targeted at specific target groups: minorities, jobseekers, youth-groups, special needs groups.

VPL-providers generally have the obligation to offer good information and advice on why, how and when to enter a validation-procedure. In practice information and guidance concerning VPL is distributed also on different levels by:

- On macro-level: the ministry of education and the social partners.
- On meso-level by the sector partners (employers and trade unions).
- On micro level of organisations by HR departments and internal VPL-‘ambassadors’.
- Any registered VPL-provider, as noted above. They are the main source for people interested in VPL.

In addition, a regional structure has been set up with 35 *Leer Werk Loketten*<sup>34</sup> across the country. Everyone – job-seeker, employee, employer – can visit such a centre and get a free advice on learning and working opportunities. These centres are a linking-pin between training providers and the labour market. They (amongst others) facilitate the cooperation between VPL providers and employees and/or employers, in order to apply VPL as a career-guidance tool.

Information and guidance practitioners in the Netherlands are already well informed about validation initiatives and practices since they are working independently from the learning and working systems to which they need to link people (their customers). They focus on the main motivation for interest in VPL, which are based on a diversity of motivators, mainly employability- and qualification-oriented:

A. Extrinsic motivators

- the employer wants me to work as a qualified worker.
- I need the qualification for a raise or a job-opportunity.
- I need to show my potential for a career step.
- I want to get exemptions for a shortened course.

B. Intrinsic motivators:

- Investing in oneself; learning as a fun-factor.
- I feel awarded when offered a VPL-procedure.

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34 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.

In this respect these practitioners are well aware of the bottlenecks in raising awareness on the value of VPL:

- Power of the standards: lack of acceptance at schools/universities that people might have learned outside of the classroom.
- The extra costs, since VPL is not embedded in education and HRM; only registered VPL-providers are allowed to offer VPL-procedures at real costs. (although subsidies can be found).
- The general idea that is a lot of effort for obtaining a qualification or job-change. It is not perceived as added value for the organization as a whole.

The practitioners are best outfitted for their role when being able to stress the benefits of VPL for the individual and offer role-models on:

- investing in yourself can be fun and enjoyable.
- opening up career-opportunities.
- empowering effect of self-valuation.
- formal growth in obtaining formal qualifications.
- target-setting in learning opens up more than just working potential; it's about life as well.
- validation incorporates learning outcomes of volunteering or citizenship too.

### **Quality assurance, evaluation and validation methods**

The National Quality Code for EVC is based on the 'European Common Principles for Recognition and Validation of Non-formal and Informal Competencies'. It was initiated in 2006 as an instrument for stimulating the use of VPL in VET and HE (PLW, 2009) by creating control and trust in the quality of VPL-providers.

In early 2010 the Minister of Education took control of the execution of 'the Quality Code EVC'. This followed a critical evaluation by the Inspectorate of Education of the quality of the accredited VPL providers (PLW 2009, IvO 2010). In this evaluation the quality of all accredited VPL providers, both on the levels of VET as well as of HE was regarded as insufficient. In general the conclusions of the evaluation were:

- the Dutch Quality Code functions properly but there is a question of ownership. Specifically the decision about which organisations can inspect the providers of the *Ervaringscertificaat* needs to be regulated.
- the quality of the providers differs too much in implementing assessments,
- the outcomes of the assessments ('*Ervaringscertificaten*') are not easily transferable between the providers.

The State Secretary of Education, Culture and Science therefore took control of the VPL-process. It was intended that during a period of three years the bottlenecks in the process should be overcome.

In 2012, the code was upgraded to a tripartite governed quality-instrument.

Government, employers and trade unions declared by signing the *EVC-convenant* that

VPL now – on top of the qualification-focused instrument in the form of APL – also was to be grounded as a labour market tool for career guidance (Vsl EVC, 2012).

The new code resulted from a broad consultation process among all stakeholders and agreement by all parties on the following main arrangements:

- The use of the code is voluntary, but the signing parties dedicate themselves to promoting the use of the Quality code for VPL.
- Everyone who commences an VPL-procedure must agree on the reasons for doing so. VPL is not a standard process but an individualised series of arrangements customised to the goal and use of VPL. Customisation is the norm.
- Every VPL-procedure ends with a standardised VPL report called *Ervaringscertificaat* (Certificate of Experience). This report states that the individual has documentation of the competencies he possesses.
- Accredited VPL providers are listed in an VPL database. This database contains information about all the VPL-procedures that are useful for potential VPL-candidates.

The 2012-update of the quality code served the purposes of – first of all - bringing together the main stakeholders (government, employers and trade unions) as covenant partners; with this shift, some initial partners in the 2006 Code such as the education boards of VET-schools (*MBO*) and universities of applied sciences (*HBO*) were given more freedom in promoting VPL. Another purpose was to link the initial code also to certification on branch- or sector-levels.

As noted above, the government has taken the lead on the national Quality Code for EVC since 2006, and confirmed its role in doing so in the updated version of the covenant of 2012. In this code the criteria are mentioned for certified VPL-procedures; for the format of VPL reports, etc. The bottlenecks in the system that existed from the start and were made transparent in the 2009-2010 investigation, however, still need to be overcome (IvO, 2012). It was especially pointed out that VPL providers need to improve the quality of the process of obtaining the assessment. The introduction of the Quality Code however also provided a better overview of the quality procedures applied to vocational competence-standards in VET and HE. The standards for VPL-procedures are connected with the requirements in VET and HE. The examination committee has its own responsibility for awarding against the outcomes of a VPL assessment. There are no official regulations for using the outcomes of an independent VPL-procedure for composing a learning path for an individual student to obtain a degree and/or diploma. Except for the fact that institutions have to accept applicants for exemptions based on (evidence of) non-formally and formally acquired competences. There are no rules on limits concerning the amount of credits to be given based on an assessment. Thus, VPL-procedures are developed on the basis of the competence standards of VET and HE (and in this way actually based on the expected learning outcomes in these standards), while implementing the national Quality Code for EVC.

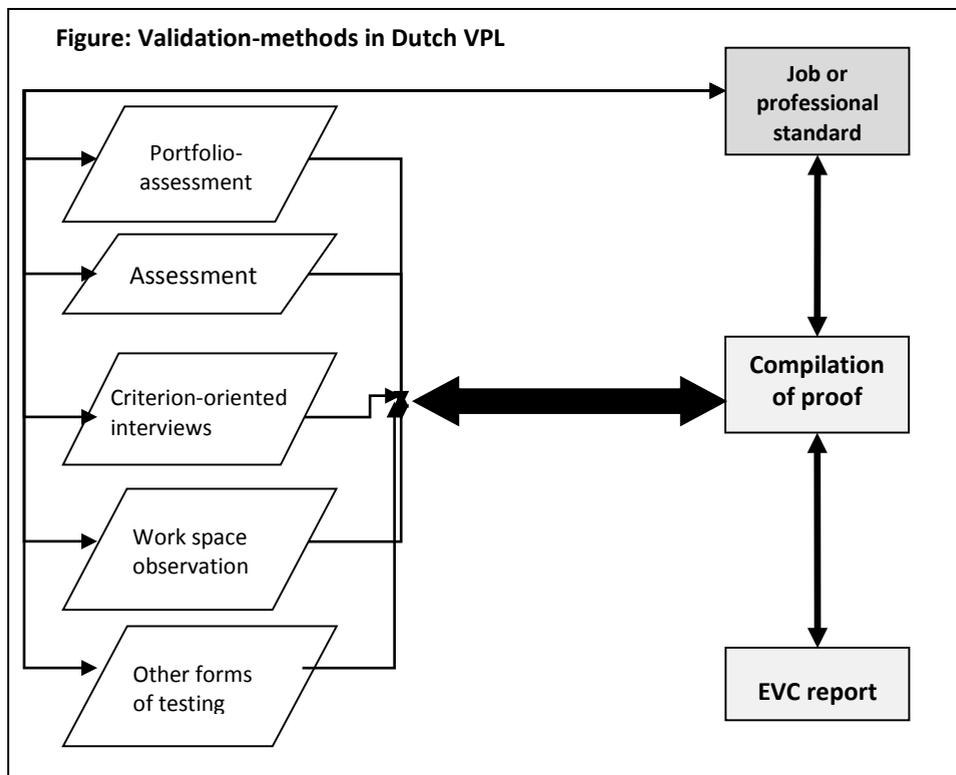
The recognised providers are included in the EVC Register, which clearly indicates to citizens and employers where they can have a customised procedure. The foundation for

quality assurance of VPL still is strong and the government and social partners want to keep on investing in this and broadening its scope.

*Validation methods*

A VPL-procedure in the Netherlands always contains more or less the same steps (Duvekot, 2009; Kenniscentrum EVC, 2009):

1. Information and advice for candidates, the employer or other organisation, etc.
2. Intake of the individual and making individual arrangements linked to the individual’s defined career goals. The candidate decides on the choice of qualification and whether to start the EVC procedure or not..
3. Recognition of competences: portfolio (supported by the coach).
4. Validation of competences/assessment (by the assessors).
5. EVC report: description of results and accreditation (by the assessor), compared with the individual career goals, together with advice on further personal development in the direction of the individual defined career goals.



Source: ECI (2008)

A candidate who wants to reflect his/her prior learning outcomes in relation to a qualification, has to fill in a portfolio (showcase) in which s/he can demonstrate how

his/her learning experiences match with the competences in the qualification s/he has chosen. In an assessment s/he is judged and is given a report (Certificate of Experience) stating all the learning outcomes that match with the learning outcomes that are defined for the chosen qualification. With this Certificate of Experience (*ErvaringsCertificaat*) s/he can turn to an awarding body (the exam committee) of a school or university. In this way it becomes clear that the outcome of an EVC procedure is foremost an official advice for the candidate with which s/he can go to the awarding body. Only the awarding body is allowed to turn the advice into an official exemption. This awarding body can decide on exemptions in the learning programme. On the basis of these exemptions it is possible to achieve a (partial or full) qualification.

Usually, a mix of methods is used in EVC 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 EVC procedures: portfolio-assessment (of and for learning), criterion-oriented interviews, observations, and other testing.

### **Validation practitioners and requirements**

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:

- *assessors*: the professionals who assess individuals when they want to apply VPL for summative purposes;
- *portfolio-advisers*: the professionals who help people fill in their portfolio;
- *developers/advisors*: the professionals who develop VPL-procedures based on national standards; they also advise on this.
- *teacher-trainers*: the professionals who train the assessors and advisers.

For each of these functions, expertise in the VPL-field 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 VPL.

The training of validation practitioners is ensured by official VPL-providers and by training-institutes within VET-schools (ROC's; MBO) and HE (HBO).

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

- Understand key concepts and benefits of VPL.
- Review and analyse models of recognition and accreditation of prior learning.
- Analyse and develop the skills, knowledge and processes required to support VPL practice.
- Understand and apply the VPL process.
- Reflect on the impact of VPL on their professional learning, practice and their educational setting.
- Understand the organisation, management and marketing of VPL.

The common set of competences (Duvekot & Geerts 2012) for VPL-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. He can apply these assessment forms integral within an VPL-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 the 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 to the level 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. N.B. 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 technical competent and must have sufficient experience and qualifications in the appropriate discipline (professionally). The assessor can prove that he has 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 (VPL) procedure 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 labor market and vocational education programs for the sake of the assessment.

#### *Qualification requirements*

According to the Quality Code for VPL, only professionals can be VPL supervisors and assessors/advisers and their competences must be documented. Until now VPL providers

can choose their own methods in proving the capability of their VPL-professionals. There is no official certificate for the various VPL-functions available, nor a standard or qualification for assessors in the Netherlands.

Proposals to create a 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. The main option is to enhance an accreditation scheme for assessors and to evaluate the quality of assessors on the basis of a national standard, including a training course for assessors. Such a national standard (for internal company and external assessors) has not yet been formulated. In practice the VPL providers have their own competence profiles for assessors. Due to the VPL Quality-code they are, however, all obliged to use the same format for filling in the reports after the assessment. Therewith a certain degree of comparability and quality-assurance is maintained.

A study, conducted by the Kenniscentrum EVC (Dungen et al, 2012) on whether this is appropriate or whether other accreditation forms are necessary and a more elaborated description of acquired competences is needed to ensure the sustainable quality of VPL, came up with recommendations concerning the professionalisation of VPL-functions. An important recommendation referred to distinguishing between an VPL-assessor and a general assessor as VPL-assessors need specific competences.

#### **To conclude: the road to take for VPL in the Netherlands**

VPL means that individuals and organisations acquire a clear picture of their competency offers, demands and requirements, work on the formulation of their demands, and invest in their 'human capital'.

For the learning system VPL means acting as a 'listening' partner, initiating and offering VPL *and* custom work. The individual (employee or job-seeker) has to prepare him/herself or be prepared to explore, identify and develop his or her personal competencies so that he or she can work proactively on enhanced employability and further career development. VPL and custom work are outstanding tools with which the individual can attain this enhancement.

On the basis of analysing the development of VPL in the Netherlands the following general conclusions can be drawn:

1. VPL has everything to do with the use of the possibilities that lifelong learning has to offer to individuals and organisations in the fields of employability and empowerment. **Organising responsibilities** in VPL is a crucial part in this:
  - a. the individual is in charge of putting together and maintaining the portfolio. The portfolio is the basis for the formation of a lifelong learning strategy;
  - b. the organisation is responsible for asking the organisation's competence questions and to facilitate investment in its own *learning* employees;
  - c. the learning facilities (professional education, schooling and training) must be able to respond to the various learning needs of the learning individual, in other

words be able to offer educational programmes that have been custom-made both structurally and in content.

2. There is support for the idea that **the individual takes a central place** in establishing, designing and implementing lifelong learning. This investment in human capital calls for co-makingship of the learner him/herself. At all times the principle process here is the process of moving towards the desired learning goals, both when determining an individual's starting situation and during an individual's development course.
3. **The portfolio** is a powerful way to give structure and content to this co-design. Guidance from within the labour market organisation could be a welcome push in this direction by offering:
  - a. training in self-management of competencies. This is a useful way to start the formation of the desired portfolio
  - b. help in putting together a portfolio in the work situation. An expert on the subject, easily approachable, who can offer help in designing a portfolio, is of great value in actually realising portfolio formation.
  - c. self-assessment tools, for instance, to help determine the competence and ambition level. This could be of great use in determining goals and direction in lifelong learning.
4. In the light of the different goals needed to make a start in lifelong learning, **further research** is needed into the motives for and the desired design of lifelong learning strategies. The variety of lifelong learning models (educational, upgrade, HRD and career models) can then be taken up on the basis of their own dynamics, in which the three actors (see 1a, b, c) can deal with varying responsibilities.
5. **VPL as a bridge** between the individual/organisation and professional education/schooling only becomes relevant when concrete learning questions have been formulated, which then need to be answered by professional education/schooling. The basis for all learning questions is, after all, deciding what the starting situation of the individual is. In addition, on the basis of a specific learning question a lifelong learning trajectory is offered; this could be a diploma trajectory but could also be enrichment learning in the form of modules, action learning, distance education, work guidance or otherwise.
6. VPL may serve as a bridge between the competence needs of, on the one hand, the organisation and, on the other hand, the individual. **This calls for two forms of VPL:**
  - a. Synchronizing competence systems of labour market organisations on the one hand, with their competence management or HRM, and on the other hand schools and institutes, with their competence-focused curricula and training programmes. The goal of this synchronization is to determine which competencies and learning environments can be added to the portfolio; in this way the portfolio of the working individual can be fed and upgraded from within the HRM and the (professional) educational and schooling system. This form of VPL is top-down oriented and strives for a harmony between competence systems in the areas of supply and demand.
  - b. Through this synchronisation the learner can make clearer choices with regards to enriching his/her portfolio. The appreciation and recognition the learning

individual seeks (partially dependent on the goals that have been set) can then be supported by two competence systems. VPL can provide concrete indications of what the most appropriate learning route for personal development is. In doing so, they can also make use of the competence acquisition that can be supported from within the own organisation or through external organisations. This form of VPL is bottom-up oriented VPL and looks for the balance between personal development questions and the most appropriate learning content and design.

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Learning is more than ever important or valuable, people are encouraged to invest in their potential throughout their lives, taking into account their prior learning. According to policy papers all across the globe, this should also concern the underrepresented groups and non-traditional learners with regard to higher education because everywhere the knowledge-society needs more higher-educated participation from all.

With this perspective in mind, the crucial question in the ERASMUS-project 'Access to Lifelong Learning in Higher Education (ALLinHE)' (517978-LLP-1-2011-1-NL-ERASMUS-ESIN) was how to further develop and implement VPL as an effectolland.nlive method in higher education, being able to integrate underrepresented groups and non-traditional learners effectively and quality-assured into lifelong learning at HE-levels?

This book is nr. 1 of the series VPL Biennale. It is both result of the project as well as an agenda for further exploring and paving the way for VPL, not only in higher education but also in other qualification-levels and contexts of work and leisure. With this book, the aim is to show that lifelong learning is possible in any context, country and culture, and that there are always shared elements that make it possible to make a manageable tool for lifelong learning out of the methodology of VPL. Why this is so relevant and of value to the citizens and their organisations across the globe is explained in the variety of approaches, practices and visions, presented in this book.

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