

## The invention of a new language of competence – a necessary tool for a lifelong learning policy

Olesen, Henning Salling

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

# LINKAGES OF VPL

*Edited by:*  
Ruud Duvekot  
Dae Joong Kang  
Jane Murray



## Linkages of VPL

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Series VPL Biennale nr. 2

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*Title*

**Linkages of VPL**

Validation of Prior Learning as a multi-targeted approach for maximising learning opportunities for all

*Editors*

Ruud Duvekot, Dae Joong Kang & Jane Murray

*Thanks*

Erik (once again)

*Order address*

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*'Linkages of VPL' are about matching the many standards, from personal and group-standards to sector and national standards for the sake of personal enrichment, career steps, qualification and other perspectives for the citizen.*

All across the globe, countries face big challenges in their learning and working systems, both *qualitatively* (reducing poverty and illiteracy, the need for lifelong learning and the upskilling and updating of competences) as well as *quantitatively* (division of labour, demographic challenges, drop-outs, (im)migration, retention). Much research has been done (and is going on) on the added value of the learning outcomes approach in National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs), the effectiveness of Human Resources Management systems (HRM) and on the methods for Validation of Prior Learning (VPL).

*The 1<sup>st</sup> VPL Biennale* that was held in Rotterdam, the Netherlands on April 9-11, 2014, intended to discuss and debate these challenges from the perspective of 'the citizen'; so from a bottom-up perspective.

The mission of *The 1<sup>st</sup> VPL Biennale* was to share information, knowledge, ideas and visions on VPL and about the creative process of learning from each other's successes, problems and solutions in 'the VPL-world'. This entailed a focus on the systematics of Validation of Prior Learning as the motor of more effective learning and working processes; all-inclusive for every citizen, regardless of status, gender, age, philosophy, special need, heritage or any other personal feature.

The crucial question for *The 1<sup>st</sup> VPL Biennale* was how to further develop and implement VPL as an effective method in lifelong learning perspectives, able to integrate all citizens effectively and quality-assured within lifelong learning strategies at all levels and in all environments and contexts?

This question relates to priority areas in policy and practices, to enhancing lifelong learning perspectives and to fostering social and economic progress by:

- a. further developing and implementing existing national legislation on VPL-enhanced lifelong learning;
- b. moving towards integrating VPL in all learning levels and environments;
- c. strengthening the levels of professionalism in VPL-functions to be able to cope with customer-steered and competence-based lifelong learning, such as functions of



- guidance, individualised and flexible teaching/learning, managing flexible programmes;
- d. opening up learning opportunities for all citizens with a special focus on underrepresented groups and non-traditional learners.

In general, the state of the art in VPL-policy, development and implementation presented at the Biennale, demonstrated 'The Power of VPL': policies, methodologies and (to a certain extent) funding opportunities are all around; what is lacking is sustainable implementation. This is the next step to take for VPL. The Dutch ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences presented a realistic look at filling in this next stage for implementing VPL:

*"We are now 'moving to the next level' of VPL, in which there will be a binary or dual approach. The new system will be implemented by 2016 and we are now working towards it, making arrangements for implementation. This dual approach consists of two tracks: (1) VPL for direct use in the labour market (internal and external mobility), and (2) VPL in formal education. VPL procedures for those who want to obtain a diploma or degree in formal education will be integrated in the educational system. By organizing VPL procedures close to the exam committees, problems regarding the acceptance of the outcomes of VPL will be diminished. And the educational institutes will get more sense of urgency, feel the need to provide flexible learning opportunities, tailor made to the capabilities and needs of learners."*

More specifically, the keynotes and the parallel sessions pointed out that VPL already is active in all lifelong learning-perspectives (qualification-oriented, function-oriented and person-oriented) on the labour market and in education. This notion was highlighted in the concluding forum: **VPL needs to move from fragmentation to integration.** In the coming years, VPL is explicitly going to be (further) embedded in the primary processes of learning (vocational, university) and working (HR systems, collective agreements, training funds). VPL will be - within these two main systems as well as between them – a matchmaker and 'guide' for sustainable personal development, shared ownership citizens-organisations of competency-based development and flexibility of the system.

The book 'Linkages of VPL' is both a 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. The reasons 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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# Introduction

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## VPL is about linking the many perspectives of learning for empowering citizens

Ruud Duvekot, Dae Joong Kang & Jane Murray

Lifelong learning is about making use of personal competences. Everyone should be aware that people are always learning everywhere, and above all, not always in a conscious or self-chosen context. The degrees to which people are consciously building on this remain strongly underexposed and under-utilised. In the modern learning society, the focus is on - or should be on - these personal learning processes. A complicating factor in dealing with this focus is that the formal procedures of teaching, training and assessment describe only a very limited part of an individual's learning potential or competences. Competences acquired in informal and non-formal learning environments are, however, essential for optimal performance on the labour market and/or in social functions. It is in this informal and non-formal learning that the so-called learning individual really demonstrates his or her potential; it is the role of lifelong learning strategies to value this formal, non-formal and informal learning. Only by focusing on the total learning potential of the individual can the road be paved for lifelong learning that connects this potential with society's needs; after all, if the learner him- or herself is able to define, value and develop the full potential, he or she will be more employable and supportive to economic and social goals of society.

In this 2<sup>nd</sup> book of the *VPL Biennale Series* the focus is on the opportunities for opening up the personal learning potential for different societal goals. This is considered a process in which validation of prior learning is about linking the many standards, from personal and group-standards to sector or national standards for the sake of personal enrichment, career steps, certification or other perspectives for the citizen. In this respect VPL is about showing the many perspectives for the personal learning potential in any given societal context.

### VPL as principle and process

The concept of lifelong learning is based on the assumption that *initial education is no longer enough for a lifetime social-economic career*. It is more important for people to develop their competences (skills, knowledge, attitude and ambitions) throughout life by realising that 'their glass is already half filled' and by understanding that everyone always learns in every possible learning context: formal (school), non-formal and informal contexts (working place, at home). In other words, lifelong learning above all means 'Validating Prior Learning', i.e. on the one hand mastering '*validating the learning*' that is constantly taking place and on the other hand '*learning the validating*' in order to begin to stimulate and develop lifelong learning in an effective and efficient way. VPL is not



only a process underpinning lifelong learning strategies but also the organising principle for designing these strategies.

‘VPL’ is as much a principle as a process, giving true evidence of the transition from the present knowledge society towards the learning society. Society is transforming into 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 are 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 where the change is having its impact, can also be distinguished, the civil society, aiming at social activation, voluntary activities, societal awareness and 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, and so on.

‘VPL’ as an organising principle reflects the change towards a learning society in which the individual learner has and takes more responsibilities for his or her own, personal learning process. It also means that the individual learner changes the existing ‘balance of power’ in learning processes because he or she will be co-steering lifelong learning with a portfolio. In this portfolio, the learning outcomes that he or 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 VPL as such contributes to the removal of barriers to the mobility of labour between countries and between sectors. At national levels, learning outcomes are 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 ‘VPL’ are shown in Figure 1.



<b>Figure 1: Goals of ‘VPL’</b>	
<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 AND 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 conditions 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 focusing on the already available quality-system based on the judgement of the existing assessment processes used by schools, colleges and universities;
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 surroundings (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 ‘VPL’;
9. Development of an individual’s right to portfolio-assessment and career-advice.

### ***The four models of VPL***

VPL is intended to recognise and to validate both visible and invisible competences of people. It is not focused on highlighting the lack of knowledge and skills but precisely the



opposite – to take stock of existing knowledge and skills: in other words, rather than being half empty, VPL takes the view that someone’s glass is half filled (Werkgroep EVC, 2000).

We can describe four main models of VPL as:

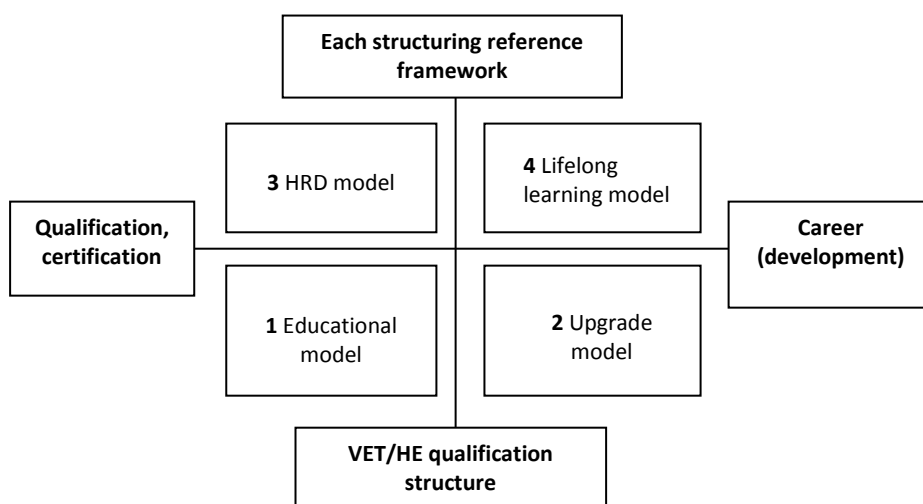
1. an *educational model* for initiating a particular qualification;
2. an *upgrade model* for determining educational or training needs of organisations or individuals;
3. a *HRD model* for matching employees’ competences to organisational aims;
4. a *lifelong learning-model* for supporting personal development.

Procedures for VPL are implemented in a variety of ways. Three steps can always be distinguished: identifying competences and raising awareness (recognition), assessing competences (validation) and planning new learning activities (personal development). Possible implications of these procedures are promoting personal self-management of competences and personal development activities. Apart from building bridges between non formal and formal learning - and between education and the labour market - at the heart of implementing VPL as a principle for facilitating lifelong learning in VET and HE is a diverse range of perspectives based on four models.

Despite the diversity, a structure can be defined for the demand and supply sides within the broad field of validation-services. The structuring is based on *the objective* (what is the expected effect?) and *the context* (which reference framework or benchmark is applied?).

Interpreting these two lines as a pair of axes, gives us four fields in which VPL can be used to serve a particular goal within a particular context: the four models of VPL.

**Figure 2: the 4 models of ‘VPL’**



Source: Feenstra, et al, 2003.



A typology of the four models produces the following description:

*1. VPL as a bridge between VET AND HE and the labour market: the educational model*

The function of VPL in this model aims primarily at providing qualification on the levels of VET and HE. The two most important forms in which this model occurs are:

- Traditional exemption policy based on previously acquired qualifications, which looks only at prior formal education and the relevant certificates;
- Exemption policy based on broader evidence; competences acquired non-formally or informally are also assessed.

A defining quality of the qualification is the primary benchmark, as it must be *recognised* and *accredited* on the responsibility of the provider (the qualifying educational institution). The goals that applicants aim to achieve by obtaining qualifications, and whether qualification is the best way to reach these goals, are not the provider's primary concern.

In this model, the provider supplies a good quality product: qualifications and diplomas for competences acquired elsewhere.

Development is offered in this sphere by providing a customised educational package.

*2. VPL as model for acquisition of initial qualifications: the upgrade model*

In this model VPL focuses on the contribution made by accreditation and certification to obtaining or retaining employment. Forms that occur in this sphere are:

- Recognition and accreditation of competences that have been acquired (formally and informally) in the context of the occupation pursued by the candidate. The procedure and tools used are tailored as far as possible to the individual work environment.
- Recognition and accreditation of competences that have been acquired (formally and informally) in the context of the occupation that the candidate intends to maintain or pursue.

VPL is tailored to the employment goals of the candidate. The competences in his or her specific context are tailored to that objective. Obtaining initial qualifications in an effective and efficient way is at the heart of this model: only the necessary training – if needs be – has to be formulated.

Providers select and design the way in which the whole process is shaped, and within that process educational institutes act as suppliers of all or part of the services.

Development is provided by offering customized forms of both formal learning and informal learning.

*3. VPL as model for upgrading competences within any structured context: the HRD model*

In this model VPL primarily aims to validate competences (provision of diplomas, qualifications or partial certificates) outside the context of VET and HE.

People acquire competences that cannot always be related to existing VET and HE-qualifications, and they do so in a variety of ways in formal and informal learning and/or



in work situations. Sector training institutes, company schools and voluntary organisations with a high professional content (sports associations etc.) are examples of organisations (or providers) that work by validating competences based on other standards.

The aim of VPL in this model is to upgrade individuals within their specific context in order to keep them employable and provide them with concrete career opportunities.

The provider supplies a good quality product: certificates and diplomas for competences acquired elsewhere. Personal development is offered by providing validation and learning at the workplace.

#### *4. VPL as model for lifelong learning*

The fourth model may be viewed as the integrated model within which the other three spheres are subsumed. 'Lifelong learning' outlines the situation of members of our society who are engaged in a process of self-development in line with their own development requirements on the one hand and the demands of their environment on the other. This model shows the learning individual who is developing himself or herself continuously and in that process makes use of the facilities provided for valuing the competences that he or she has acquired personally or professionally. He or she might also use them to make it clear what he or she has to offer to employment organisations and other collaborative efforts.

The many forms in which this model emerges are offered by providers (employment organisations, head-hunters for senior posts, employability coaching) who guide individuals in the development of their portfolios. Where necessary, teachers and trainers act to certify competences.

The characteristic feature is that the development programme is determined and controlled by the person in question. While institutions facilitate and provide support, they do not set the direction.

#### **Moving towards a personal approach**

In order to facilitate or even empower individual learners it is necessary to have a clear view of the process of VPL and the role of these individuals in the process. VPL is an integral process in five phases. Together these five phases take ten steps in which the learning individual can make himself or herself co-maker of the process:

- the preparatory phase aiming at commitment and raising awareness of the value of someone's competences,
- the recognition of someone's competences,
- the valuation and validation of someone's competences,
- (advice concerning the) development of someone's competences
- The structural implementation of this process in individually or organisationally steered policy.

In table 1 the VPL-process is shown in its five phases and 10 subsequent steps.



**Table 1: the VPL –process in 5 phases and 10 steps**

VPL phase	VPL step + demand	Action individual/organization	Contribution from knowledge infrastructure
<b>I. Preparation</b>	<b>1. awareness</b> <i>what is the need for investing in human capital or in yourself?</i>	formulation of the mission of the organization inventory of personal problem areas VPL pilot decision	VPL information materials workplace visit employability scan advising on approach
	<b>2. determine learning objectives</b> <i>what learning objectives are relevant for individual and/or organization?</i>	establish ambitions and learning objectives strength/weakness analysis individual/organization	model for strength/weakness analysis
<b>II. Identification</b>	<b>3. determination of organizational or personal profile</b> <i>how do you determine the need for competencies of an individual or within the organization?</i>	draft job profiles emulate profiles determine portfolio model	format for job or competency profiles portfolio model
	<b>4. retrospection</b> <i>how to describe and document acquired competencies</i>	completion of portfolio by candidates portfolio counselling	portfolio counselling training
<b>III. Accreditation &amp; Valuation</b>	<b>5. standard setting</b> <i>what is the desired assessment standard?</i>	establish standard self-assessment overview of career opportunities	advising tools/online tools general career advice
	<b>6. valuation</b> <i>how to value the assessment?</i>	portfolio assessment internal assessors	training of assessors assessment, incl. drafting advising on certification and/or career opportunities
	<b>7. accreditation</b> <i>how to accredit?</i>	cashing in on certification opportunities	counselling to certifying institution



<b>V. Devel- opment</b>	<b>8. prospection</b> <i>How to put personal development plan (POP) into action</i>	building on career opportunity advice in POP arrangements on custom work	follow-up advice offer for custom work
	<b>9. working on POPs</b> <i>custom-made development/learning</i>	POP into action	delivery of custom work
<b>V. Imple- men- tation</b>	<b>10. structural implementation</b> <i>evaluation of pilot; how VPL can be systematically incorporated into the organization policy or a personal approach?</i>	evaluation of VPL pilot embed VPL in HRM, including financing promulgate (new) organizational policy individual administers portfolio	accreditation of assessors (internal/external) VPL quality control procedure

Source: Duvekot, 2007, pp.140-141.

Table 1 shows that the portfolio is the recurring theme. From the establishment of the need for investment in "human capital" up to and including the anchoring of a VPL-based approach built on *valuing learning*, the portfolio is there. The objective in relation to the context is established for each phase in succession; the portfolio is filled with learning experiences related to the objective; the portfolio as such is evaluated and recommendations are made; via custom work, the portfolio is augmented, and finally, the portfolio is taken as a starting point for new learning issues from a VPL-embedded situation. The entire VPL process, then, begins and ends with the portfolio; at the same time, each one is the start of a new VPL process. This is known as the "portfolio loop."

Looking at more of the table, we see that in each phase, concrete services from the knowledge infrastructure are available to support employability and empowerment issues. These services range from portfolio guidance and providing trainings to assessment and recommendations at the workspace. Filling in potential learning tracks is oriented towards offering custom work in terms of desired content, form and environment. In addition, the following matters must be arranged: the quality assurance for the VPL procedure; the accrediting of assessors, the development of the "portfolio loop" and the development of self-assessment instruments with which the candidate can determine for himself or herself whether a certain, desired level is available and the training that fits with the personal profile. All this, of course, must be available online.

It is evident that more research is needed to make clear how the practical use of VPL can be further implemented. Looking at the present state of the art in VPL-development, the relevant questions are: how to activate and link the citizens and the stakeholders in the worlds of learning and working, and – above all - is the self-steering learning individual as a new actor in the learning arena the main exponent of the new learning paradigm that is competence-based and learning outcome-oriented?



In answering these questions the 1<sup>st</sup> VPL Biennale clearly pointed out that the general focus should be on:

- a. Putting the individual learner with his or her portfolio in the position of co-designer/–producer of learning opportunities,
- b. Connecting this individual ownership – embedded in the personal portfolio - with the need for competences from society and use the supply of competences for the world of learning to strengthen someone's portfolio,
- c. Focusing on learning outcomes instead of learning-input,
- d. The total validation-process as portfolio-based; i.e. focused on recognition, accreditation and (further) development,
- e. Linking competence-based systems, like qualification frameworks and human resources systems, in order for the individual learner to take a pick where, how and why to enrich his or her portfolio,
- f. Lifelong learning concerned with stimulating the learning triangle: individual (portfolio-build up), organisation (competence-based Human Resource Management) and education (learning-made-to-measure).

The answers can give a more transparent image of the usefulness of the four models of VPL for activating lifelong learning and empowering citizens:

1. VPL as an educational model for initiating a particular qualification;
2. VPL as an upgrade model for determining an organisation's educational and training needs and the individual's learning potential;
3. VPL as a HRD model for matching employees' competences to organisational aims;
4. VPL as a lifelong learning model for supporting personal development.

More knowledge in the actual use of validation is needed in order to adapt, develop or strengthen the necessary validation-services; for, so much is clear now, validation connects all stakeholders in lifelong learning strategies! Short-terms goals are:

- Stimulating the awareness of the learning individual by offering courses in self-management of competences and portfolio-build up,
- Helping organisations to articulate their need for competences and embed this need in pro-active competence-management,
- Making a match between the already articulated demand for competences on the labour market and the already developed supply of competences in education and training,
- Preparing the development of new supply of learning-made-to-measure in order to make better matches with the learning-demand derived from one of the perspectives of the models.

Commitment is the most essential precondition for making use of VPL and thereby changing the 'looks' of the formal learning and working systems. Commitment means that all parties involved will take up their own responsibility in any given model of VPL. For the education sector, this will not be very easy since learning is traditionally more supply-oriented than demand-oriented. Competence-based learning and VPL can



however make learning more a matter of fun again, since learning will be made more to measure, combining formal and non-formal learning irrespective of the learning context. The motivation of learners is therefore higher. For teachers and schools, this will then also be very stimulating and inspiring. In this sense one could state that learning will not only be a matter of employability but also of *enjoyability*!

### ***VPL is here to stay!***

The present publication provides an insight in the development of the VPL for the many perspectives it can bring to target groups across the globe. As the companion to the 1st VPL Biennale in Rotterdam, the Netherlands (March 9-11, 2104), this book provides contributions on a diversity of topics that all highlight the potential of linking personal portfolios to any standard in learning and working systems.

The first contribution by *Joy Van Kleef* was prepared following the 1st Annual Biennale on VPL. It takes into account the author's presentation, previous publications, and her learning from the plenary sessions and workshops. She states that the 'Rotterdam' VPL Biennale in 2014 was perhaps one of the first occasions on which policy makers and practitioners could collectively begin to examine the relationship between maturing theories on prior learning and VPL, the growing body of research in the field, and their broad implications for VPL practice. This level of integration represents progress in the evolution of VPL; however, it remains difficult to discern micro/meso-level, quality-focussed, operational practices that bring theory, research, and rhetoric to life. *She* comments that only recently has there been exploration of the relationship between quality in VPL and national qualification frameworks (NQF) (Singh and Duvekot, 2013). NQFs are essentially communication mechanisms that allow us to understand learning expectations and achievements. According to UNESCO, national qualifications frameworks recognise learning outcomes and competences from all forms of learning (UNESCO, 2012) and in recent years, particular emphasis has been placed on the importance of recognising non-formal and informal forms of learning (i.e. VPL). One interpretation of Singh and Duvekot's findings (2013) is that the extent to which a national qualification framework will be socially accepted depends on a society's level of confidence in the quality of the processes used to evaluate prior learning. Van Kleef's contribution proposes three of many practical, quality assurance strategies that can be used by micro/meso level organisations to engender such confidence.

The contribution by *Henning Salling Olesen* places VPL and related strategies for recognising people's individual experience in the context of lifelong learning policy. There is a significant discrepancy between the overall societal request for lifelong learning and the adult population's differentiated learning interests and diverse attitudes to education and training. VPL could help to bridge this gap by connecting individual plans to societal strategies for competence development. One example of just such a bridging project is a Danish initiative undertaken by the trade union of unskilled workers to secure every member an education plan and alongside this, open up their opportunities for future life prospects.



*Ruud Duvekot* argues that there has been a shift in the philosophy of human learning. While the focus used to be on accumulating knowledge, the emphasis has increasingly shifted toward acquiring competences. Competences combine knowledge, skills and attitude and are action-oriented. In supporting someone's development it is important to know the competences he or she already possesses. Testing someone's competences in relation to a qualification, certificate or curriculum chosen in advance is referred to as assessment. The role of the assessor and the guide is vital for starting up personal development in any kind of form. Transparent guidance and reliable assessment build the links between a portfolio, including a personal action plan, and the specific development steps advised by the assessor. In any given model for validating prior learning outcomes (formal, non-formal and informal outcomes) guidance and assessment have several functions: (1) providing information, (2) raising levels of achievement, (3) measuring this achievement reliably and (4) organising the assessment effectively. This contribution provides a manual for training of the assessors and the guides; it also includes the quality criteria for assessment processes that deal with the accreditation of prior learning outcomes.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> contribution, *Anita Calonder Gerster* explains that Validation of non-formal and informal learning goes hand in hand with the appreciation (valuation) of individual learning processes and its outcome. The changing world of employment attaches a increasing importance to what employees or learners do know, do understand and are able to achieve. This brings a dual challenge: more investment in the empowerment and employability of individuals and related to this the linking together of innovative and sustainable education programmes and existing methods of valuation and validation. She notes that there is a move within the European Commission calling on Member States "to put validation arrangements in place by 2018". This will include approaches relevant to the issues mentioned. The question arises of how bottom-up and top-down stakeholders and experts can and will join the debate. Amongst the topics which this paper will discuss are the interrelation between valuation and validation of learning outcomes – illustrated by the situation in Switzerland - competence-centred policies and approaches and their development and implementation from the perspective of bottom-up stakeholders. Furthermore, there will be discussion about characteristics of systems with integrated quality assurance qualifying users and experts as a key factor for facilitating targeted career planning and providing easier access to validation.

*Dae Joong Kang, Jung Hyun Kim and Hyeryung Jung* introduce in the fifth chapter the policy background of recognition of prior learning (RPL) in South Korean and a training program for RPL-professionals developed to incorporate RPL in higher education institutes more successfully. The authors investigated the training programs in Europe, US and Canada, consulted adult and higher education experts, and surveyed university officials to develop training program suitable to South Korean context. A three-stage 100-hour training program based on the key competences of RPL-professionals is presented.



The article of *Ellen Enggaard* and *Kirsten Aagaard* was already published in the 1<sup>st</sup> volume of the Series VPL Biennale. This is the improved version. The contribution 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.

*Fjóla María Lárusdóttir* presents the EU funded project “Increasing employability of low qualified workers through the development of a skills recognition system in adult education”. The aim of the project is to improve quality and efficiency of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning system for low-qualified workers in Iceland. The project focuses on increasing possibilities for the target group in regards to Validation of Prior Learning (VPL); it had done so through the development of a VPL system that covers the majority of studies offered at Upper Secondary School level, alongside developing VPL opportunities against job standards and employability skills. During one and a half years of the project’s lifetime an enhanced model has emerged for the ETSC to work with, increasing quality and efficiency. It is therefore unfortunate that EU has decided to terminate the project (and other IPA supported projects initiated in Iceland) due to political reasons. The contribution focuses on the results and effects of the project so far.

*Dae Joong Kang* proposes in his chapter a multi-dimensional validation of prior learning (VPL) as an instrument for empowering North Korean refugees in South Korea. After North Korea experienced a mass starvation in the mid-1990s, about 26,000 North Korean people came to South Korea to flee the harsh conditions. As a result, the South Korean government implemented various support policies to integrate the North Korean refugees into the South Korean society. The author introduced current summative validation of formal education, special admission and financial aid for North Korean refugees to access higher education in South Korea along with South Korean contexts of higher education. The author argues that reflective- and formative-VPL can be a powerful instrument for helping North Korean refugees’ environmental adjustment in South Korea for it can open individual learners’ perspectives of their competences.

The chapter of *Céleo Emilia Arias* is a content analysis based on the validation of prior learning in order that it can be integrated into the new educational model of *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras-Unah*. Securing a robust knowledge base requires assessments of what has been achieved so far within a research field, so it becomes crucial to review the literature critically. When a field of study is in a process of relative rise, as could be the case of Valuation of Prior Learning (VPL), it is possible that this process has not been as strict as other empirical research. Greater consistency is then required in the quality measures in aspects of validity and reliability of arguments and



conclusions, as well as greater clarity and transparency in how to perform a process. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a critical review of literature on VPL.

*Mauro Palumbo, Nicoletta Piccardo and Sonia Startari* present an Italian case in their contribution. The issues of Validation of Prior Learning and the certification of competency have only recently been prioritized in Italy. The application of European directives in this area has been rather slow and it has clashed with the division of institutional and functional competences in terms of instruction and professional development training. At the end of 2000 the University of Genoa started with some specific initiatives and is now involved in a research study about VPL for workers coming from social and large retail sectors. Its aim is to define a model which could be adopted as a standard for translating VPL into learning outcomes and, afterwards, into university credits.

*Metka Ursic and Sergij Gabrscek* describe in their chapter how validation of prior learning is becoming an alternative route to higher education in Slovenia. The system was developed, however the individuals that are embarking on the journey of recognition of their prior achievements face a number of challenges. Experiences of a non-traditional mature student (belonging to the group of over 50 years of age), combined with experiences of some other students that participated in the research, provide a frame for presentation and discussion of the approaches and possible improvements.

The chapter by *Kim Shinil* examines the measures of VPL in Korea by focusing on their functions and procedures. The measures of VPL in Europe and the North America have been evolved primarily to help the underprivileged learners enter the higher education by the validation of learning results obtained from the non-formal and informal settings, without taking a normal procedure of admission. On the contrary, Korean VPL was developed with focus on helping non-student learners earn degrees without entering into or finishing higher education. The Bachelor's Degree Examination for Self-Education practised since 1990 provides an alternative track that awards the bachelor degree based on only the series of examinations without admission to higher education institutions. The Academic Credit Bank System implemented in 1997 is another scheme to award the degree of higher education through validation of learning results in non-formal and informal settings. These two VPL schemes have a historical foundation of the Korean education culture maintained for 1,000 years. New models of VPL in Korea are discussed in the final part of the paper.

*Bernadette Thomas* investigates the Cités des Métiers (CDM)' and their relation with VPL. The CDM are multi-partnership platforms dedicated to information and counselling for guidance throughout life. The first platform originated in the same period as VPL (in French '*Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience*' or '*VAE*'). The CDM have a close relationship with the institutional context of VAE: they support the development and the structural implementation of it with a range of services focusing on the needs of the



citizens. Practicing VAE and accompanying guidance-services in a bottom-up approach, the CDM contribute to the development of VAE occurring at the different stages of the road that people's lives may take. Analyzing 10 years of practicing VAE in the CDM will bring some critical success factors that might be of interest to others working with VPL in practice.

The chapter by *Anna Serbati, Daniela Frison and Sabrina Maniero* is based on the findings of a research project by the University of Padua in Italy, aiming at:

- promoting an active process of recognition of competences that adults already acquired in the workplace, vocational training courses or in other contexts in order to customise their educational path (gaining credits for entering study programmes).
- investigating the educational and guidance dimensions of the portfolio construction within a guided process for the development of awareness of the competences gained through reflection during and after the action.

The closing chapter by *Patrick Leushuis* provides an overview of the development in past, present and (near) future of VPL in the Netherlands, with a focus on the role of the Dutch Quality Code on VPL. Development started in the 1990s and led to a variety of VPL practices with different methods, instruments and procedures. As a result, government, social partners (employer organizations and trade unions) and the education sector decided to implement a Quality Code on VPL, which came into effect in November 2006. Extensive programs led to an increase in VPL provision and participation, but problems with acceptance of Certificates of Experience (VPL reports describing the competences of individual VPL participants) remained. In 2013 government and social partners decided to change the quality-strategy for VPL. The Netherlands is currently moving towards a dual approach, consisting of two tracks: (1) VPL for direct use in the labour market, and (2) VPL in formal education. Full implementation will be realized by 2016. The 'one size fits all' approach of the national VPL Quality Code will no longer be applied. The dynamics of this on-going process provide insight in the quality-management of national VPL-systems.

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# Adopting practical strategies to enhance quality in Validation of Prior Learning

# 1

Joy Van Kleef

The '1<sup>st</sup> VPL Biennale' (Rotterdam, 2014) was perhaps one of the first occasions on which policy makers and practitioners could collectively begin to examine the relationship between maturing theories on prior learning and VPL, the growing body of research in the field, and their broad implications for VPL practice. This level of integration represents progress in the evolution of VPL; however, it remains difficult to discern micro/meso-level, quality-focussed, operational practices that bring theory, research, and rhetoric to life<sup>1</sup>.

It is only recently that there has been exploration of the relationship between quality in VPL and national qualification frameworks (NQF) (Singh & Duvekot, 2013). NQFs are essentially communication mechanisms that allow us to understand learning expectations and achievements. According to UNESCO, national qualifications frameworks recognize learning outcomes and competences from all forms of learning (UNESCO, 2012) and in recent years, particular emphasis has been placed on the importance of recognizing non-formal and informal forms of learning (i.e. VPL). One interpretation of Singh and Duvekot's (2013) findings is that the extent to which a national qualification framework will be socially accepted depends on a society's level of confidence in the quality of the processes used to evaluate prior learning. This article proposes three of many practical, quality assurance strategies that can be used by micro/meso level organizations to engender such confidence.

## Theoretical Context

For VPL to become a quality-focussed, mainstream activity in any context, it must be anchored in rich and coherent theoretical understandings of adult learning and assessment. Theories on experiential learning dominated the early years of VPL development but since about 2000 additional and alternative theoretical perspectives have been introduced. For example, the perspectives of Lave and Wenger (1991) on situated learning and communities of practice and Beach (1999) on learning transitions have been discussed fully in previous contributions to the literature (Van Kleef, 2012a, 2012b). They form the theoretical foundation for this article and in combination with

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1 This article was prepared following *The 1st VPL Biennale* in 2014 in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. It takes into account the author's presentation, publications and her learning from the plenary sessions and workshops.



published research on quality in VPL, provide defensible support for the proposed strategies.

### *Prior Learning is Situated Learning*

The essence of situated learning theory is that we all see the world in our own way. That is, everything we learn is shaped and coloured by the historical, biographical, and cultural contexts in which we have lived and it is through social interactions that we are able to arrive at shared understandings. Our societies have developed a variety of ways to facilitate shared understandings of situations and approaches to problems. This includes tools such as language and within language the use of metaphors and examples. The more alike we are, the more likely it is that we will understand one another, and even then there are inescapable differences because we, and our experiences, are all unique.

This individualization of all our learning has clear implications for VPL. At the most micro-level, that is, the level of assessment within organizations, it means that the knowledge and skills of both VPL assessors and candidates are situated in the contexts of their own histories, biographies, and cultures – a challenging situation in which to reach shared understandings of what is expected and what has been achieved from assessment. At more macro-levels where VPL involves multiple organizational stakeholders, the situated nature of the way they see the world present a similar challenge.

### *Learning Transfer is more of a transition*

The second theoretical concept relevant here is Beach's (1999) concept of consequential learning transition. The premise of learning transitions is that learning does not always transfer across contexts easily; but thinking about transfer as a transition rather than a simple transfer helps us to envision the conditions necessary to enable learning transfer to occur. According to Beach, during consequential learning transitions, learning is inevitably transformed by a degree of new learning. When this transformation happens, new knowledge and skills are constructed and identities are altered. Beach argues that systems of artefacts (symbols, texts, and technologies) can be used to support transition. Beach's perspective has implications for quality in the validation of prior learning primarily at the micro-level: if an individual's prior learning requires a transition to be understood in new contexts, quality becomes tied to a) the conditions of the transition process, b) the supports it provides, and c) the change that it can engender in both individuals and organizations. However, because all learning is situated, how quality is defined, assured, and eventually judged must be determined jointly by the stakeholders affected by VPL's development, delivery and impact – in other words, the collective efforts of relevant communities of interest and practice.

How do these theories connect VPL and national qualifications frameworks? VPL is a mechanism for identifying how our prior learning relates to the expectations for learning articulated through NQFs. Both micro and macro levels of VPL depend on stakeholder communications and cooperation to promote understanding, ensure transparency, and engender trust in one another and in VPL outcomes (Van Kleef, 2012, Murray, 2013). In



national qualifications systems, the stakeholders (governments, public and private educational institutions, employers, occupational bodies, delivery agents, candidates) have their own situated understandings, interests, roles, and responsibilities. This diversity needs to be recognized for transitions to common understandings and acceptable conditions for VPL to be established. International organizations such as CEDEFOP, the European Commission, the OECD and UNESCO have laid a foundation for common understandings (i.e. principles and guidelines that also respect diversity). What remains to be seen are whether these understandings and tolerance for diversity will be successfully negotiated in the VPL operations of micro/meso organizations, and whether affinities among quality measures can be established.

### **Creating Affinities Among Quality Measures**

Much of the early research on quality in VPL is in the form of issues identification (e.g. the REFINE (2006) and TRANSFINE (2003) projects; Otero, Hawley and Nevala, 2008) and the consequent development of guiding principles for implementation generated, importantly, through consultations with VPL's communities of interest (e.g. the Scottish Qualifications Authority, 2005; Kenniscentrum, 2007; European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2009; Werquin, 2010). Of particular note are the European Guidelines on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (2009). However, in the last few years, research has noted that broad principles, guidelines and general recommendations that VPL be integrated into the existing organizational quality mechanisms, are insufficient for quality assurance (Van Kleef et al, 2007; Downes, 2010). One reason for this is that existing quality assurance mechanisms do not always examine the detailed design or operations of assessment. For example, program evaluations in many postsecondary educational institutions do not examine assessment methods and tools used by faculty in the classroom; neither do they examine faculty's knowledge or skills in assessment, even though many faculty have had no formal studies in teaching or assessment. Selection of fit-for-purpose assessment methods and assessor expertise are identified repeatedly in the VPL literature as vital for quality but would often be left unaddressed if only current quality assurance measures of education and training systems are adopted.

Explicit VPL quality assurance measures are required to ensure transparency and public credibility. In an effort to further the discourse on this point and bring greater clarity to what is meant by quality in VPL at any level and in any context, Van Kleef (2012) proposed a 'working definition' that emphasizes the social nature of learning, assessment, and recognition:

*Quality in VPL is a socially constructed concept articulated through an agreed upon set of criteria and indicators the meanings of which are negotiated and shared by stakeholders in communities of practice and communities of interest, and engender public confidence in the outcomes. (Van Kleef, 2012, 2014 forthcoming).*



This 'working definition' is grounded in lessons learned from international research, consultations and development work on VPL criteria and indicators; but it does not illustrate in concrete terms, strategies that can be used by organizational management, assessors and advisors at micro/meso levels to devise explicit quality assurance measures. To improve the quality, transparency, and credibility of organizations' VPL operations, the following three strategies are proposed for further exploration:

- 1) Explicitly linking principles to organizational policies and procedures,
- 2) Developing VPL as a program, and
- 3) Bonding VPL expertise and support to the context.

1. *Explicitly Link Principles to Organizational Policies and Procedures*

A review of national and international practice suggests that organizations' VPL policies and procedures need to explicitly express what is meant by quality in VPL and how it is achieved in the context of particular communities of interest and practice. One approach that can establish affinities across levels and contexts is to adopt the concept of quality as an overriding principle that subsumes all other principles and practices from pre-assessment preparation to post-assessment tracking. Bringing relevant stakeholders together to establish a shared understanding of quality and the principles it should embody in context, is a first step that also facilitates development of local communities of interest, a preferred precursor to setting more specific, contextualized quality standards. Drawing on the international literature and research to inform this process, and grouping selected principles as sub-components of quality, creates a framework for establishing quality-focussed practice. This approach supports the notion that quality is a socially constructed concept that requires the engagement of stakeholders to transition their own situated understandings into a shared, defensible understanding of quality.

By way of example, a Canadian group of stakeholder organizations collaborated in the development of academic credential assessment and VPL policies and procedures for immigrant professionals. Beginning with academic credential assessment, the group first developed a set of principles that it believed could frame a new credential assessment process from a quality perspective. It included:

<i>Quality Principles</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Accessibility</li><li>• Collaboration</li><li>• Consistency/Reliability</li><li>• Fairness</li><li>• Objectivity</li><li>• Transparency</li><li>• Validity</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Accountability</li><li>• Comparative Approach</li><li>• Facilitation of Labour Mobility</li><li>• Feasibility</li><li>• Professional Integrity</li><li>• Timeliness</li></ul>

Following this, each VPL policy and its related procedures was developed using these principles as guides for content. When each policy and procedure was complete, it was



cross-checked to affirm the primary principles at work and reviewed by each stakeholder organization. The first phase of the process resulted in 20 cross-linked policies and procedures that were again cross-checked to identify and adjust any over or under-representation of selected principles.

The final policy and procedures manual addressed the following policy issues:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role and responsibilities</li> <li>• Applicant communications</li> <li>• Document Authentication</li> <li>• Language Proficiency Testing</li> <li>• Fees</li> <li>• Assessment Procedures</li> <li>• Assessor Training</li> <li>• Monitoring and Evaluation</li> <li>• Special Circumstances</li> <li>• Public Awareness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purpose of assessment</li> <li>• Access to applicant records and information</li> <li>• Translations</li> <li>• Confidentiality and Privacy</li> <li>• Assessment Criteria</li> <li>• Assessment Decisions</li> <li>• Appeals</li> <li>• Conflict of Interest</li> <li>• Conducting Research</li> <li>• Quality Assurance</li> </ul>
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Figure 1 illustrates the standardized template used to ensure coverage of key elements of each policy. The primary purpose of the manual was to ensure that the assessment process and the measures undertaken to ensure its quality were cohesive, coherent, transparent, and supported by all stakeholders.

1. (ORGANIZATION'S) ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Policy Number:

Date Adopted/Revised:

Amendments Since Adoption/Revision:

POLICY OVERVIEW/RATIONALE

POLICY STATEMENT

RESPONSIBILITIES

DEFINITIONS

RELATED POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

EXCEPTIONS

USEFUL RESOURCES

RELEVANT QUALITY PRINCIPLES



*Figure 1: Policy Template for Assessment (Van Kleef, 2014)*

The outcome of this process was a shared understanding of what was necessary to deliver quality-assured assessment in the context of these organizations' operations. Flaws in the former process were identified and plans for redress were collectively made. The process also had positive impacts on the organizations' development as a community of interest and the establishment of a smaller, quality-focussed assessor community of practice. The second phase of the initiative is to develop VPL policies using the same principles-based framework with the anticipated result of a coherent, cohesive assessment process that uses quality as the driver to take into full account individuals' formal, non-formal, and informal learning.

The context of this initiative was VPL for immigrants in a regulated profession. The model allows procedures to be systematic within a flexible framework that responds to the international knowledge base but also allows for customization. Accordingly, the process and products could be used/adapted by organizations involved in any of the three forms of assessment present in national qualifications frameworks (summative, formative and generic assessment) recently identified by Singh and Duvekot (2013).

## *2. Develop VPL Assessment as a Program*

In many Canadian postsecondary institutions, a common practice has been for individual faculty members to focus on summative VPL on a course by course basis primarily for academic credit/exemption. Institutions may have formal policies governing eligibility for VPL but for the most part, the process is administered by individual departments and instructors. Only a handful of institutions have dedicated VPL staff to promote good practice and ensure that adults with prior learning are welcome to seek assessment. If available, professional development for assessors is voluntary, and little tracking of outcomes and impacts is conducted. External stakeholders are rarely consulted and the exercise of collectively defining quality goes unaddressed. Often it is the professionalism and commitment of individual faculty members that determines the quality of VPL processes and their outcomes. Concerns about quality endure. As one college official noted during consultations on the quality of current practices, one would have to blow the dust off their policy and procedures manual if they wanted to look something up. As another stakeholder remarked, "we don't call it VPL because what we are doing is better quality".

This does not describe a system one might use to model international practice; yet it is typical of VPL in education in many countries. There is a need to find new ways of organizing VPL that gives it parity of esteem with organizations' core programs and services. One means of achieving this is to establish a VPL assessment quality 'program', that is, a set of coherent policies, procedures and practices that adds depth to VPL policy and procedures by encompassing several inter-connected VPL stages (i.e. pre-assessment preparation, assessment, documentation, post-assessment feedback, evaluation and tracking) across an organization. Status as a program provides a permanent place for VPL on organizational agendas and in annual budget cycles; and it provides a structure for quality assurance measures across participating departments.



As discussed more fully in earlier research (Van Kleef, 2012b), one way of setting up a VPL quality program is to draw on the research of Baartman, Prins, Kirschner and Van der Vleuten (2007). Bigg's (1996) concept of constructive alignment is used by Baartman et al. (2007) to take into account the learner-centred nature of competency acquisition and expands traditional concepts of validity and reliability into a broader vision of quality assurance as a program to ensure quality competency-based assessment in education. I suggest that Baartman et al.'s quality framework may be equally applicable to multiple contexts of VPL. The framework encourages a combination of traditional and competency-based methods and tools such as demonstrations, oral presentations, multiple choice exams and portfolios, the selection of which is based on the principle of 'fitness for purpose.' The quality criteria that form the framework are: acceptability, authenticity, cognitive complexity, comparability, cost and efficiency, educational consequences, fairness, fitness for purpose, fitness for self-assessment, meaningfulness, reproducibility of decisions, and transparency. The following description of these criteria is an adapted excerpt from earlier publications (Baartman et al. 2007; Van Kleef, 2012a, 2012b).

**Acceptability:** All stakeholders should approve of the assessment criteria and the way the assessment program is carried out.

The criterion of "acceptability" expands the concept of validity and reliability by taking a broad view of "stakeholders," and adds weight and social value to the standards by which the quality of VPL assessments are judged. For example, in education, the primary stakeholders include institutions, learners, employers, regulators, and policy makers.

Acceptability also relates to advising and documentary supports provided to those involved in a VPL process – VPL candidates, assessors, and advisors. Research suggests that clear benchmarks for relevant and sufficient evidence, fulsome assessment preparation procedures, and meaningful post-assessment feedback are contributors to a VPL process's acceptability. Characteristics of advisors and assessors are also components of quality requiring stakeholder acceptance.

**Authenticity:** The degree of resemblance of an assessment program to the future workplace (the assessment task, the physical context, the social context, the assessment result or form, and the assessment criteria).

The criterion of "authenticity" reflects the importance that Baartman et al. (2007) ascribed to assessment that reflects real life performance as much as possible. Yet they also argued that competencies that rely less heavily on context can be assessed using more traditional, standardized means of assessment (such as multiple choice examinations). They drew on the principle of 'fitness for purpose' to assist in aligning competencies with the most appropriate assessment method and tool. Research has suggested that both VPL candidates and staff support the use of a variety of assessment methods and tools, but have greater confidence in performance-based



assessment in which opportunities to explain candidates' actions are encouraged (Van Kleef, 2012c).

**Cognitive Complexity:** VPL assessment programs should reflect the presence of the cognitive skills needed and should enable the judgment of thinking processes. The capacity of assessment methods and tools to assess "cognitive complexity" is a demonstration of how well these tools reflect established competency standards and how well thinking skills are integrated into those standards. This criterion has an element of the traditional concept of construct validity, in that assessment needs to assess the level of learning that it claims to assess.

**Comparability:** VPL assessment programs should be conducted in a consistent and responsible way. The tasks, criteria and working conditions should be consistent with respect to key features of interest.

This criterion embeds elements of the more traditional concept of reliability but also elements of VPL that extend beyond consistent assessment administration. Research has provided some examples of these elements including the importance of positive staff relations and collaboration, and the use of tools and procedures that assist advisors and assessors to understand their respective roles and responsibilities.

**Cost and Efficiency:** The time and resources needed to develop and carry out the competency-based assessment, compared to the benefits.

Although many stakeholders, especially in the education sector, express support for VPL in principle, perceptions of related costs both in terms of time and money have been persistent sources of concern and resistance. There are strategies that can help to mitigate per-candidate costs, but experience tells us that VPL should not be viewed as a significant cost-saving measure without close scrutiny.

**Educational Consequences:** The degree to which assessment programs yield positive effects on learning and instruction, and the degree to which negative effects are minimized.

Research suggests that there are numerous educational consequences of VPL that influence the quality of the experience and its outcomes. For candidates, important learning and identity changes occur throughout the assessment preparation stage. With the assistance of advising, these changes help candidates undertake the transition necessary for adapting their learning to a new context. Following assessment, learning also occurs through feedback from assessment staff. This, in turn, helps candidates to identify needs and opportunities for supplementary education. VPL staff also experience significant learning about how to improve the VPL process through their engagement with colleagues and candidates.

**Fairness:** Assessment candidates should get a fair chance to demonstrate their competencies, for example by letting them express themselves in different ways and making sure the assessors do not show bias.



From earlier research, this criterion appears to directly corresponds with VPL candidate and staff insights into the benefits of multiple methods of assessment and tools. It also pertains to concerns about the unfairness of a process that views their competencies from a deficiency perspective. VPL candidates point to opportunities to demonstrate the relevance of all their competencies, the availability of transition mechanisms to relevant supplementary education, and cooperation from key stakeholders, as indicators of the fairness of a VPL process.

**Fitness for Purpose:** Alignment among standards, content, instruction and assessment. Assessment goals and methods should be compatible with organization and candidate goals.

The 'fitness' of an assessment method or tool for the 'purpose' for which it is being used is a key quality consideration shared by both Baartman et al. (2007) and Van Kleef (2012). The principle of fitness for purpose encourages the selection of methods and tools based on a determination of what will best demonstrate relevant learning at the required level. This includes both traditional, standardized testing and competency-based assessment methods and tools. In Van Kleef's research, VPL staff tied this concept to validity in that a tool will not accurately assess achievement if it is not fit for the purpose. It will also fail to provide appropriate educational continuity if it does not provide sufficient evidence of existing competencies or accurately identify learning needs.

**Fitness for Self-Assessment:** VPL assessment programs should stimulate self-regulated learning of candidates. Assessment programs should include specific methods to foster such learning, such as practice in self-assessment and giving and receiving feedback.

In Van Kleef's (2012) study, well-developed assessment preparation materials and the capacity of multiple VPL methods and tools to facilitate self-assessment were highly regarded by most VPL candidates. Multiple tools were also used by VPL staff to identify the need for supplementary education. VPL candidates used the self-assessment value of assessments to compensate for the lack of social value assigned to the VPL process by a key stakeholder.

**Meaningfulness:** VPL assessment programs should have a significant value for all stakeholders involved.

The ultimate meaningfulness of VPL can be a significant factor for candidates and deliverers to which they accordingly assign value and a sense of quality about VPL. Research suggests that in some contexts, if a VPL service has no public meaning, it is a poor reflection on its quality.

**Reproducibility of Decisions:** Decisions made on the basis of the results of an assessment program should be accurate and constant across situations and assessors. Decisions should not depend on the assessor or the specific assessment situation.



"Reproducibility of decisions" refers to the need for assessment decisions to be accurate and constant over situations and assessors. The quality of an assessment program should not depend solely on one assessor or a specific assessment situation. This criterion has elements of the traditional concepts of reliability in its meaning, and can also pertain to the qualities of advisors and assessors, the sufficiency of performance-based evidence, and the importance of VPL staff relations.

**Transparency:** Assessment programs should be clear and understandable to all stakeholders (e.g., government, educational institutions, employers, occupational bodies, delivery agents, candidates). External controlling agencies should be able to get a clear picture of the way in which an assessment program is developed and carried out.

This model for assessment quality programs has potential for all forms of VPL. Accordingly, its adoption could have a unifying effect on perceptions of VPL's quality within and across NQF contexts – across educational credentials, workplace certifications, and national qualifications. Added strengths of Baartman et al.'s (2007) framework are that it has been validated by empirical research in the context of education and is grounded in the social practice of stakeholders that requires a balancing of power in the development of VPL parameters and their evaluation. Macro-level principles and guidelines can help but they are no surrogate for the social construction of more operational meanings by those engaged in and with delivery processes.

### *3. Bond VPL Expertise and Support to the Context*

Based on research to date, the working definition presented in this paper is a useful touchstone for discussions on quality, but the reality is that at all levels, the quality of VPL outcomes depend on the expertise of VPL practitioners – in particular assessors and advisors.

Over the past two decades, studies have found assessor and advisor expertise to be a critical component of good quality VPL, and have identified a variety of positive characteristics and competencies. For example, Heidegger and Peterson (2006) argued that Roth's (1972) categorization of three types of competencies has relevance to VPL and the competencies necessary to be effective practitioners. These three classifications are content-related competencies (occupational knowledge and skills), social competencies (interpersonal skills), and personal competencies (values and attitudes). In a study that examined a range of theoretical perspectives aligned with VPL, Van Kleef (2007) found that a frequent view that effective practitioners in education have a number of personal competencies including:

- an open attitude toward alternatives to traditional behaviourist-based assessment;
- a willingness to learn about VPL and use it as a tool to understand adult learners' needs;
- an ability to communicate their expectations clearly and provide a supportive environment throughout the VPL process;



- a capacity to contribute to research on VPL, in order to address implementation challenges, and
- a willingness to resolve quality assurance concerns, improve their own professional practice, and contribute to the field of education.

Several countries have initiated measures to identify assessors' qualifications. In a follow-up to Common European Principles for the Identification and Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (2004), draft guidelines on the qualifications of assessors were proposed. Assessors are expected to:

- be acknowledged as professionals in their sector;
- be familiar with the validation process;
- have no "personal" interest in the validation outcome (to guarantee impartiality and avoid conflicts of interest);
- be able to inspire trust and to create a proper psychological setting for the candidates;
- be committed to provide continuous feedback on the match between learning outcomes and validation standards/references (via support systems); and
- be given initial and continuing training in validation and quality assurance (e.g., mechanisms, tools).

The Netherlands' voluntary APL Quality Code (Kenniscentrum, 2007) emphasizes the need for VPL provider accreditation to ensure that:

- assessor independence is guaranteed;
- the roles of supervisors and assessors are separate;
- supervisors have a proven track record of competency;
- assessors have a proven track record of competency; and
- supervisors and assessors keep their professional skills up to date.

A framework for defining the competencies of VPL advisors and other support professionals was established by the EuroguideVAL project (2005-2007). This initiative resulted in a set of Common European Standards for the Professional Development of APEL Practitioners (2009).

The literature further describes organizations that have attempted to operationalize calls for VPL expertise. For example, a number of Canadian educational institutions have undertaken a strategic approach to VPL professional development for faculty (Morrissey et al., 2008). In addition to providing other professional development activities, one of these institutions requires all faculty to complete a Certificate in Adult Education as a condition of their employment. Learning about VPL is a component of this program, and faculty are required to implement a VPL process to demonstrate their skills in facilitating adult learning. The institution's strategy is intended to enable faculty to demonstrate their prior learning and, at the same time, gain knowledge and skills in good assessment practices for VPL with hands-on use of assessment tools. A number of courses in the certificate program address issues related to student assessment and evaluation. The



institution also offers training for VPL practitioners on-site and online. Since 2001, more than 550 individuals have completed the VPL training programs.

### *Key Contextual Factors*

The research literature on VPL practitioners in education and employment suggests that the competencies and training required for assessors and advisors are determined by at least six key contextual factors:

- the type of VPL (e.g. formative, summative, generic)
- the selected assessment methods and tools (e.g. portfolio assessment, multiple choice tests, demonstrations, oral presentations)
- the cultural context (e.g. education, employment, career planning)
- the purpose of assessment (e.g. access to education, academic credit/exemption, licensure, personal development)
- the target group (e.g. adult learners, immigrants, employed workers, unemployed adults, youth)
- assessors and advisors' prior learning

Singh and Duvekot's (2013) report on practices in 23 countries in the northern and southern hemispheres illustrates the under-development of VPL expertise in many countries. One strategy to encourage action is for stakeholders to use the six key contextual factors noted above to define VPL initiatives and customize assessor and advisor competencies and training programs. Drawing on and modifying previously successful, similarly contextualized initiatives is then possible. Including competencies, training, and operational requirements on VPL assessment quality programs in a VPL policies and procedures manual links the three proposed strategies.

There are of course, many questions that remain. For example, in what ways do VPL practitioner competencies vary for different types of assessment – do assessors always need to be subject matter experts; does assessment of non-formal learning require particular assessor characteristics? Does VPL expertise impact the transfer of learning recognized in formative assessment to recognition for educational or occupational access or credit? Would new strategies such as the secondment of VPL assessors from workplaces to educational institutions and institutional VPL assessors to workplaces help to cross-pollinate stakeholder understandings of important learning and thereby improve social acceptance of assessment outcomes? Related to this is the question of expertise required for appropriate assessment tool selection. For example, are portfolios the most fit for purpose; do they privilege individuals already familiar with the culture of formal education and individuals with superior skills in writing and reflection?

### *Support Resources*

The research literature also suggests that assessing organizations should take an additional step to maximize quality in VPL by developing specific artifacts, or support resources, such as rubrics, answer keys, assessment protocols, and holistic marking procedures for assessors and preparation guides and advising programs for candidates.



These supports help both assessors and candidates when they are developed within a framework of stakeholder social practice. Supports also presume a level of expertise among assessment developers and deliverers. Perhaps more than in any other country, Australia has attended to the need for support resources for VPL assessors engaged in assessing national qualifications. Comprehensive national training packages supplement the training (Skills First, 2008) and accreditation processes that Australians must complete before becoming VPL assessors. Quality is identified as a key motivator and it is integrated into the country's competency-based VPL process. The process is itself subject to review through mechanisms established under the national qualifications framework. Extensive resources are available to all organizations on developing consistent and quality-focused assessment strategies.

We need to acknowledge the research on VPL expertise and supports (Travers, 2014 forthcoming) and explicitly incorporate its lessons into our everyday understandings of quality, into VPL policies and procedures, and into robust VPL training strategies – not just one day workshops – designed on the basis of key contextual factors such as those presented in this article.

### **A Summary of the Literature**

A summary review of the literature on quality in VPL reveals patterns that may help to inform operational decision-making. There is evidence that:

1. There is broad consensus on the importance of quality in VPL in all its forms and contexts and in particular, concern with the consequences of poor quality VPL. There is evidence that these concerns are well-founded.
2. The engagement of stakeholders in the determination of quality measures is vital to VPL's credibility.
3. Quality in VPL should be viewed more broadly than the establishment of valid and reliable assessment tools. Conceptualized as an over-arching principle that affects every aspect of VPL operations from pre-assessment preparation to post-assessment evaluation and tracking, quality can be used as a foundation for development and operational activities.
4. Quality is directly linked to purpose and context. Quality indicators for some purposes may be different than quality indicators for others and this may affect how VPL is constructed. A single approach across all contexts is unlikely to succeed.
5. Careful planning of organizational policy and procedures, and governance of appropriate selection of assessment instruments are ways to facilitate quality in VPL.
6. Developing and operating VPL quality assurance as an assessment quality program promotes coordination, cohesion and coherence.
7. The principle of fitness for purpose helps VPL adjust to the context in which it is being used. Using multiple methods of assessment including traditional methods and competency-based assessment helps to mitigate the weaknesses of each.



8. Advising and support from assessment preparation to post-assessment feedback has a positive effect on the quality of assessment outcomes and assessor performance. The research most frequently suggests that the types of supports include self-assessment tools that facilitate conscious reflection, orientation to the new context, sustained human advising, multiple methods of assessment, assessors knowledgeable about learning transfer and assessment, and materials that provide clear information on procedures and standards involved.
9. The quality of competency-based VPL assessment rests heavily on the judgment and expertise of assessors. Explicit quality measures are particularly important here.
10. Evidence of monitoring the quality of VPL assessments is lacking. Evidence of the impacts of assessments, particularly related to stated social justice and employment goals is lacking. These knowledge gaps reduce the capacity of VPL programs to demonstrate their quality and this jeopardizes their credibility.

The challenge with all of this is that even when it looks good on paper, the reality of practice is never quite the same as we expect. Just as prescriptive models of national qualifications frameworks have struggled, so too will prescriptive, one-size-fits-all VPL quality assurance models. Because VPL involves multiple contexts and stakeholders, just one way of working is not sufficient. We should expect even the best laid plans to change as we learn. It is time to move forward to explore concrete operational challenges and opportunities to synchronize quality assurance across the various contexts of national qualifications while still respecting diversity. The three strategies presented in this paper are intended to further those explorations.

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# The invention of a new language of competence – a necessary tool for a lifelong learning policy

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## 2

Henning Salling Olesen

### Introduction

In order to meet the ambitions of a lifelong learning policy it is crucial to meet the challenge of developing a new language of competence which is relatively independent both of traditional academic curricula on the one hand and short-term labour market skills requirements on the other – while at the same time making validation understandable in both contexts. The idea of Lifelong Learning entails a vision of every individual not only having access to formal and non-formal education and training throughout the lifetime but also making use of all informal learning which occurs in everyday life: work life, family and social life, leisure and cultural activities. The driver for contemporary policy interest in lifelong learning is the recognition of the importance of human resources and competences for economic competitiveness – and an increasing recognition that that not all these learning goals can be met by education and training policy alone. For this reason, a lifelong learning policy agenda in principle needs not only to address education and training, but in principle a multitude of policies relating to work organisation, labour market, community and culture, health, and so on. However, diverse as they are, the elements of such a policy can also be contained only in very abstract notions like lifelong learning or learning society.

For the individual subject this is not the most relevant perspective. Interests in education and training are widely differentiated in strength as well as direction and the awareness of learning opportunities in everyday life may be integrated in those specific activities, or may be entirely absent. The wide variations in motivation and potential for learning are clear in the patterns for participation in formal and non-formal continuing education, as we are only too aware from education sociology. Nevertheless, much of the variation may also be less visible, connected with people's life experiences, life styles and identities, and not at all related to education and training. Against this background of the political agenda, the increasing appeal for learning may be perceived as a promise for new opportunities for some, for others it may be viewed as a stressful pressure attacking one's identity, and for others again it may be regarded as just something quite irrelevant.

Most of the population accepts the general notion of the lifelong learning policy agenda. But it is not an easy task to make it relevant to individuals: this is where the tools of VPL, RPL, portfolios and so on, can prove valuable. If such tools can be developed to help



individuals recognise the value of previous life experiences and competences they have learned for different purposes, if they can draw attention to education and training opportunities which the individual had previously taken for granted, and if they can help also in meeting requirements and access thresholds by providing certain rights, then these tools may become seen as valuable means for obtaining personal career goals and prospective life courses. These tools are not the whole story though: many practical and financial aspects have to be dealt with in order to create a relevant tool for the individual learner subjects. Learning motivations –hence the relevance of validation – are deeply seated in the entire life situation of each individual, and dependent on collective social and cultural pathways.

In this chapter I provide a very concrete illustration of the context in which a validation procedure was brought to bear: the Danish trade union '3f', whose members include unskilled workers and some groups of specially skilled workers in manufacturing industry, construction, food processing, and transportation. These workers are among those who are most vulnerable to economic and technologically driven structural changes, most often in the guise of globalisation. The workers have very diverse relationships to education and training – some could not imagine anything worse, others are actually very skilled – for example, in some of the newest technological areas. The union launched the idea that each worker should have the right for a “competence development plan” or more plainly an “education plan”, based on an “real competence assessment”, and accompanied by guidance helping him or her to consider possible training and education opportunities, future employment outlook, potential career shifts in the light of his or her life situation and visions for future life. The hope was that the competence development plan would strengthen workers’ self recognition and raise their awareness of possible developments whilst at the same time creating a competence development plan: a tool for an individual to achieve his or her goals immediately or at a later stage.

The necessity of strengthening the workforce individually and collectively in a risky labour market with increasing competence requirements presents a challenge to the trade union. The union’s quite sophisticated strategy is to develop tools that can be adopted for self-recognition of members and as a reference for bargaining individual and collective rights for education and training at a workplace or national level. There are already quite numerous – and fairly unexploited – opportunities for continuing education. But the problem seems to be that they do not seem concerned with employees’ interests and motivation apart from those which are direct and narrow preconditions for their employment.

These ideas are now subject to political deliberation, especially in relation to labour market intervention and services for the unemployed, as well as an element in collective bargaining. The line of thinking presented, however, makes it clear that there is a basic challenge in developing a mediating language relevant to individuals’ subjective worlds as well as the more objective societal level where legal, institutional or economic



recognition rule. The challenge already appears in the policy discourse: the union argues for an education and training plan, though it is well aware that many members are ambivalent to this idea, and the notion of competence is not foregrounded because of workers' self-consciousness in this regard, based on their actual possession of competences. I term this challenge: *"The invention of a new language of competence"*.

### **Languages of competence**

Assessment at the individual level has been introduced in European countries under slightly different headings: VPL, competency assessment, recognition of prior learning, the Danish "realkompetencevurdering" (an assessment of competencies from all previous experience), the French "bilan de compétence", and so on. Assessment criteria are completely different. But generally we see two regimes of recognition; work life competence applied by business and industry and scholastic assessment of knowledge and intellectual skills applied by the formal education institutions.

Recognition by business and industry has a basic instrumental perspective on the competences of the workforce and is based on the perceived ability of the subject to function in the work situation. Staff selection procedures and HRD functions attempt to assess competences in relation to a specific job, with the awareness that demands are subject to the structures and economic dynamics of the labour market. Simple in principle, but complicated in practice, it could be argued that some of the short-sighted practices in industry (hire-and-fire) are simple reflections of the real complexity combined with relatively low on-the-job-training costs. Conversely, HRD policies with high internal investments and long cycles in employment benefit from the under-theorised adaptability of work force. Employees learn and adapt more than one can predict or direct. During recent decades, and with great variation, internal labour market adaptation and not least competence development have come to play a more significant role – which means that business increasingly pursues a "bilan de competence" model. However, the underlying rationale for business, even with variations, is employability and specific job relevant competence.

In principle, recognition by the educational system is based on documented completion of formal courses and description of course content. The background is an educational world-view that is one or two hundred years old. This mode of recognition is validation of specific knowledge and skills to handle that knowledge. Directly or indirectly this model presumes a linear educational structure in which each element stand on the shoulders of the previous element. In recent decades this approach has been modified in at least two ways: the educational systems are no longer so clearly uni-linear. First, vocational education and training have formed institutional systems in their own right in many countries. Second, a mix of human liberal culture and the need to mobilise new groups of students have led to a range of new admission and access pathways. It is my impression, however, that validation is still granted very much *in spite of the main structures*, driven by counsellors and liberal educationalists, and they deal with minor proportions of students. And last, but not least, admission criteria in general equate prior



learning to the core *curriculum* of the education in question, or the perceived potential to fulfil this criterion within the education program. Rather than an assessment of some general or alternative competences that might seem valuable for the learning outcome or for the professional scope of the program assessment is related to the traditional curriculum.

In spite of some intermediate variations the two regimes of recognition are basically disjointed.

I should emphasise that my own interest here is not related to considerations of equality or legal-administrative factors that typify the question of access to education and various professions, or the legitimacy of the way business selects and evaluates employees. These are, of course, important for access to education and various professions, or the legitimacy of the access to certain professional licenses or the selection of employees. My point of departure is indeed a critical view of these “regimes of recognition” but I think we need to understand and challenge their different rationales and approaches, and for this purpose, we need new concepts.

### **A new regime of ‘Competence’?**

The language issue immediately appears as a search for a “general equivalent” of human capability in the context of validation – or recognition - of prior learning, describing the learning resources available and the potential outcome both in formal education and in other areas of everyday life, particularly work life. Norwegian and Danish VPL initiatives have selected the term “competence”, as can be seen from the terms of “realkompetanse/realkompetence”. This concept has been launched by economists – first in the OECD – as an element in an overall reconfiguration of the evaluation and description of education. The concept of competence was picked from social psychology, and transferred to organisation and management theory about work organisations. It was the intention to grasp the relation between the objective practical functions, in which people are supposed to apply their capabilities, and the psychological generic nature of learning the capabilities.

Competence was promoted as the standard tool in order to describe all educational and training arrangements to outcome (target) descriptions instead of input (curriculum) descriptions. The purpose was to enable measurement and comparison of the efficiency of education. The notion of competence offers a new and more holistic view of human capabilities, which is in line with lifelong learning, rethinking the relation between education, training and learning in everyday life. In the meantime it has also become used as a governance tool, in the bureaucratic installation of lifelong learning policy *within the educational* systems, and more widely as a mental priming for a more market driven management. The use of the terms of competence in the European and national qualification frameworks and in governance documents has been predominantly a paper exercise until now. Superficially, the objective to enable cross-national comparison in a more flexible way appears to have been achieved by using more standardised



vocabularies - at least as far as institutional education and learning is concerned. However, the connection to underlying realities remains very weak.

A language for validation of prior learning – and in a wider sense for linking different arenas of learning - must not be confined within one of the existing regimes of recognition, but must be able to integrate and reformulate the concerns which are their core rationales. In this context the challenge is not a language issue in a narrow sense, it is *a discourse issue*. A discourse is a language use which is closely interwoven with and reflects societal practices and realities that cannot be achieved only by inventing a new terminology. This means that the development of a new language based on the competence notion must be helpful in processes of developments in the societal relations and institutional contexts. But such new ways of thinking can hardly be promoted top-down, by defining a new language of regulation. This is where the validation of prior learning can be useful if it enables a dynamic transformation from the bottom-up.

I think that a language for validation can be based on the notion of competence, but it will have to be reinterpreted. In the first place this will be a great challenge for formal education and training: a deeper reconfiguration of educational practices in line with the outcome description and the notion of competence. Education and training are still predominantly structured around disciplinary knowledge and prescriptive approaches to professional practice, making little or no use of students' and participants' experiences and insights from previous learning in other spheres of life.

The introduction of outcome-oriented description was initially motivated by internal economic efficiency in formal education and training. But it was connected with increased focus on the importance of human resources for the economy and for the competitiveness; after all OECD is an alliance of the most developed capitalist countries experiencing an increasing competition from the rest of the world. Consequently the competence discourse has also been perceived as a tool for transforming formal education according to narrow economic concerns. The main understanding of competencies in everyday language is actually related to work. But it has a broader meaning than the narrow and one-dimensional job-oriented view of work qualifications, such as that adopted for labour market statistics, for example. When economists imported a concept from social psychology it was not only in order to educate the bureaucracies in formal education systems, it was also intended to provide a framework for a new and more dynamic perception of human resources in business.

In the 1950s and 1960s both industrial sociology and management realised that industrial one-to-one-qualification framework was insufficient to identify the qualification needs. This was partly because they changed rapidly and partly because they changed qualitatively so that different types of non-specific, process-oriented skills became essential. In the following years, discussions continued in business and among researchers and politicians about "soft qualification", "generic skills",



“Schlüsselqualifikation”, and so on. OECD launched a project to identify the generic factor(s) under the headline of *key competence*, DESECO. However, in my view, this project more or less resigned from its original ambitions, resulting in the bureaucratic use of the vocabulary in a seemingly general matrix of all people related to formal education and training.

The original competence concept acknowledges the subjective nature of competencies. This means that the assessment of competence must in principle include individual experiences and assessment of subjective dynamics of the individual. Taken to its limits this is both impracticable and in opposition to the current function of prior learning validation as a legal basis for access to education and training, and in a few cases to certain jobs or work licenses.

One of the experts which were engaged in the project coins the problem in the following way: “such scientific plans have often failed in psychology, however. The underlying multilevel models can be logically reconstructed, but not validated psychologically. The different degrees of abstraction mean, therefore, a fundamental asymmetry in competence research - high abstraction: intellectually brilliant, pragmatically hopeless; low abstraction: pragmatically useful, intellectually unsatisfactory” (Weinert, in Rychen/Salganik, 2001, p 52). I think that Weinert’s difficulty was connected with the built-in challenge for the development of a “general equivalent” of human capability.

A language which is sensitive to subjective diversity could only be established by an elaboration of a more dynamic concept of competence. The ambition to establish a canon of generic skills that could be measured and assessed for each individual, and held against criteria of recognition related to one or the other job or a scholastic curriculum cannot – as Weinert remarks – be carried out in a psychologically valid way. Competencies are established in processes of subjective engagement which are individual and situated; they may be gendered, class based and so on, but they are always mediated in individual experience. Their “transferability” represents the cognitive and emotional work of the individual subject which has the nature of learning, detachment and discovery of *something specific*.

At this point I will mention briefly an example of a competency which most people perform to some extent: change of perspective. It is a basic aspect of understanding and accepting other people, and it may be developed by the interaction with family, leadership in community etc. In a professional career it may become crucial for the capability to relate to clients, patients, users and so on, or to colleagues, and it will have to be redefined by professional knowledge: professional relation is performed as a specific relation, but still with wide variation. The validation procedure will need to interpret and assess the potential for transforming specific individual life experience of “interaction between different people” into a capability of changing perspectives in the new professional context, or in relation to the type of study which is the aim of the individual. A suitable language must be able to describe such individual transformation



potential. In order to become a useful tool for the legal or certifying part of validation the language will have to describe the key *patterns of transformation* – cognitive and emotional in relation to careers and experiential trajectories. This will require a proxy categorisation of relevant modes and levels of experience in relation to a range of imaginary futures, for example possible career perspectives or content of knowledge and skill.

It is quite clear that any such categorisation involves a contextualisation of capabilities in relation to societal practice. This contextualisation involves something more than abstract cognitive knowledge: it also involves subjective significance of these practices. However, it is difficult to specify theoretically the “non-cognitive” psycho-social prerequisites - and perhaps it is also politically challenging because it is in part a question of active involvement in and acceptance of given practice contexts, which is a matter of industrial relations and eventually of politics.

At this point, I do not have many answers to the question of how we can bridge the gap between logical output categories and psychological valid subjective transformation. This is a task for theoretical and empirical research as well as the accumulation of practical experiences from conducting validation procedures in practice. I have presented a broader theoretical and diagnostic discussion of these questions in an article (Salling Olesen, 2013) and the thematic issue of the journal in which it appears. This article illuminates the very different ways of using the notion of competence, not least the connotations with which a competence discourse is perceived. The work with recognition or assessment of competences operates in the societal space indicated, whether it operates with the term competence or not.

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# Training the assessors and guides for validation of prior learning

# 3

## A proposal for the training of assessors and guides in assessments of non-formal and informal learning outcomes

Ruud Duvekot

In modern society it is of primary interest to enhance human learning potential, capacity and flexibility. It makes no difference whether one is working, learning or seeking employment. The emphasis is on the extent to which someone can contribute to society, in his/her (voluntary) work, social activities and private life. In order to be able to deal with people's learning potential, terms such as knowledge, skills and attitude are qualifying and are subsumed under the common denominator 'competences'. However, competences include more than that. Implicitly, they also refer to the talent to adjust to changing circumstances, flexibility or deployment potential. A competence is actually to know how to act in a certain way. Whether someone is competent becomes clear from his or her actions (Lyotard 1988). Competences not only include professional competences but social and personal competences as well. Competences are in a continuous state of flux. Learning – and thus developing and using competences - begins from birth and continues throughout life. Everyone already learns throughout their lifetimes; it just needs to be valued and guided. Society has a major interest in capitalising on this. It already takes place in part, since more formal educational pathways can be followed in the school system during certain periods in life. More non-formal and informal pathways are followed at other times in life. The validation of prior learning (VPL) is intended as the instrumentation for dealing with the diversity of these pathways.

In supporting someone's development it is important to know the competences he or she already possesses. While people's knowledge used to be tested primarily by written examinations, methods are now needed to 'measure' people's competences. Testing someone's competences in relation to a qualification, certificate or curriculum chosen in advance is also referred to as *assessment*. In an assessment, various methods can be used to test someone's competences. The portfolio is often used to collect evidence of someone's competences. For example, it may involve diplomas attained, but also a description of someone's work experiences, videos, photos and proof of professional products. To supplement a portfolio, a criterion-oriented interview is sometimes held with the participant in an assessment. In the interview, which is often based on a



checklist, an extensive discussion is conducted with the participant about his or her activities (within or outside of work). Another popular supplement to the portfolio is the practical observation or the practical test. This examines how the participant performs in his or her normal activities or in a given work assignment.

Portfolio-assessment is also practised a lot. Portfolio assessment is the systematic, longitudinal collection of student work created in response to specific, known instructional objectives and evaluated in relation to the same criteria. Assessment is done by measuring the individual works as well as the portfolio as a whole against specified criteria, which match the objectives toward a specific purpose. Portfolio creation is the responsibility of the learner, with guidance and support, and often with the involvement of peers and parents. The audience assesses the portfolio.

In this contribution, the focus is on the central role of assessors and guides in promoting and supporting the process of validation of people's prior learning experiences for the sake of giving them access to their personal lifelong learning process. This role is explicated by presenting the way in which the professionalism of assessors and guides can be trained, enhanced and/or guaranteed. The chapter contains both a description of the necessary competences of the train-the-trainer and a description of the competences – to be trained – of assessors and guides. Furthermore, the chapter offers a model for developing, testing and implementing the training in a practical way.

The concluding reflection points out the major challenges that assessors and guides in validation processes should focus on. The proposed training model – enhanced by feedback from the ALLinHE-partners and by prof. Francklin Rivas from Universidad de Los Andes, Venezuela<sup>2</sup> – aims at answering these challenges by offering a quality-assured, certified and embedded model for becoming a professional assessor and guide. This model builds strongly on the training-model designed for the EU-funded CAPIVAL-project<sup>3</sup>. The model provided an essential element in the ALLinHE-project for supporting the development of transatlantic lifelong learning programmes that are based on shared values for guidance and assessment in order to create accessible learning programmes within national learning contexts.

### **The central role of the assessor and guide**

The role of the assessor and the guide is vital for starting up personal development in any kind of form. Transparent guidance and reliable assessment are the *matchmakers* between a portfolio, including a personal action plan, and the specific development steps advised by the assessor. In any given model for validating prior learning outcomes a policy on guidance and assessment has several functions: (1) providing information, (2)

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2 Cooperation with prof. Rivas on the theme of training assessors and guides was established in the Alfa III Project "Transatlantic Lifelong Learning: Rebalancing Relations (TRALL)".

3 See: Duvekot, R.C. & J. Geerts (Eds.) (2012) *Handbook for the assessment and validation of pedagogical competences of adult educators*. Timisoara: IREA/Brumar.  
<http://www.irea.ro/en/images/publications/capival.pdf>



raising levels of achievement, (3) measuring this achievement reliably and (4) organising the assessment effectively.

The functions of assessor and guide may be considered as interchangeable. An assessor must also be able to guide, and vice versa. For both functions, the training is appropriate. However, there is one important difference. The main difference is that - in addition to the competencies that apply to the assessor - a guide has a different communicative role in the interaction with the candidate for a particular assessment: advising, steering and informing on top of the weighing and judging.

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 customer-oriented validation and/or valuation. Additionally, 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 an assessor therefore 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 and the guide, it is recommended that a quality-procedure for validation-procedures is formulated which is highly cost-effective and very accessible to candidates; this will create trust in the validation-process. Speaking about 'quality-trust' instead of 'quality-control' seems more appropriate for such a quality-approach. Possibilities for organising such quality are:

- any assessor and guide should first design and fill in his/her own portfolio and personal action plan; only then they can be given entrance to assessor/guide-trainings,
- a professional register for assessors and guides should guarantee their competences and professionalism,
- every two years a new assessor and/or guide accreditation should guarantee professionalism by ensuring assessor quality. Assessor- and guide-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, employers and trade unions),



- quality of assessors and guides implies being able to refer to a standard for assessors: this standard is developed in many international projects and already available; it only needs a specific context for national application.

## **Requirements for the trainer of the assessors and guides**

### *Competences of the trainer of the assessors and guides*

A trainer who will train assessors should possess the following competences.

<b>Managing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides a clear structure to others by setting goals and priorities, by making (result) agreements and/or giving instructions and directions,</li> <li>• Practices the necessary authority,</li> <li>• Checks whether people are complying with the agreements and guidelines and undertakes action if necessary,</li> <li>• Delegates effectively and clearly the tasks, the responsibilities and/or certain powers to others, thereby making good use of the diversity within a group.</li> </ul>
<b>Presenting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is able to comment and explain the topics/subjects clearly, understandably and correctly,</li> <li>• Communicates concisely and exudes confidence and expertise,</li> <li>• Trains in an enthusiastic and inspiring way, with effective use of humour,</li> <li>• Is empathetic with audiences and works in a corresponding style of presentation.</li> </ul>
<b>Learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintains the own expertise and skills if necessary and takes steps to further develop,</li> <li>• Learns from mistakes and feedback,</li> <li>• Demonstrates (actively and systematically) that s/he is working on his/her own development.</li> </ul>
<b>Guiding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coaches, advises and/or motivates others, aimed at achieving goals and/or performing of tasks and assignments,</li> <li>• Empowers others to achieving results and solving problems (independently),</li> <li>• Supports others actively in their development.</li> </ul>
<b>Commitment and conviction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Makes a powerful and positive impression in the contact with others,</li> <li>• Puts ideas and opinions forward with convincing arguments,</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convinces also on the emotional level,</li> <li>• Provides clear and powerful direction to conversations, discussions and/or negotiations,</li> <li>• Supports efforts to reach agreement on the outcome.</li> </ul>
<b>Applying professionalism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knows, how to solve issues and problems, based on the own professionally/technical understanding,</li> <li>• Shares, where appropriate, his knowledge and expertise with others.</li> </ul>
<b>Attention and understanding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shows interest and understanding of the ideas, beliefs and emotions of others,</li> <li>• Empathises with the views and feelings of others,</li> <li>• Listens well and demonstrates tolerance and kindness,</li> <li>• Shows appropriate concern and support others when they have difficulties,</li> <li>• Demonstrates self-reflection.</li> </ul>
<b>Ethics and integrity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shows integrity and acts consistently in line with the norms and values of the organisation, (professional) group and/or society,</li> <li>• Takes into account the environment and respects differences between people.</li> </ul>
<b>Management of the needs and expectations of the "customer" (focus)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investigates the needs and expectations of internal and/or external customers,</li> <li>• Tries as much as possible to focus on these needs and expectations,</li> <li>• Demonstrates a customer-friendly attitude,</li> <li>• Keeps a close eye on the satisfaction of "clients" and takes action if necessary.</li> </ul>

#### *Other requirements*

Besides controlling the aforementioned skills, the trainer of assessors needs to be able to function in different roles:

- Speaker:* In the training situation there is much interaction between the trainer and the group. There are also periods when the trainer has to explain issues in a more one-dimensional manner.
- Leader:* Sometimes in a group there is a resistance to certain activities. The trainer is able to persuade them to act anyway.
- Coach:* When the trainer conducts an interview with an individual student, it is important that the trainer understands the strengths and weaknesses of that person. Listening is an important skill. Giving personal advice is the next step.



- d) *Organizer*: Trainers are often also responsible for coordinating training programmes. In addition, there are often many practical issues concerning the training.
- e) **Advisor** : The trainer advises the client about the courses that are appropriate for solving the problems facing the client's organisation.
- f) *Developer*: The coach is responsible for developing new courses. The trainer must be able to develop his own course material.

## Training of Assessors and Guides

### *Target groups*

This kind of training is for:

- Teachers and others working in the domains of learning/education and human resources management who want to become proficient in the role of assessor;
- Teachers and others who want to work with competency-based assessment methods such as the criterion based interview, portfolio and practical simulations;
- Teachers and others who want to work as assessor in VPL procedures.

Recommended group size:

- 10 participants  
The maximum number of participants varies depending on the homogeneity of the participants (especially in terms of experience and knowledge).

### *Entry Requirements for training participants*

- Familiarity with competence-steered functioning and evaluation;
- A minimum of five years' experience in an applicable context (public and private sectors; third sector; citizenship);
- a minimum of one year experience in roles as guide and assessor;
- Able to be present in all training sessions.

### *Objectives of the training*

After the training, the participants should be able to:

1. Know what is going on competency-based assessment methods, and understand the concept of assessment in procedures for Validation of Prior Learning Outcomes.
2. Apply the following competency-based assessment methods:
  - Portfolio-assessment
  - Criterion based interview-technique
  - Practice simulations (performance assessment)
3. Have knowledge of the competence-profile and responsibilities of the guide and the assessor.
4. Have personally experienced what it means to be assessed (composing a portfolio and undergoing the prevailing assessment).



5. Know the different phases in the assessment process; they worked with them in their country's prevailing assessment model(s), they know the characteristics of this model and they can review the application within three competency-based assessment methods.
6. Are themselves aware of their own assessment style and pitfalls.
7. Know what the criteria are for writing a competency-based assessment report writing according to the nationally applied format.
8. Are able to discuss an assessment report with a candidate.
9. [*Applicable for the guiding function*] Know how they can guide a candidate in preparing for the assessment, including offering a quick scan and helping to build up a good portfolio.

### *The competences of assessor or guide*

Below is a description of the competences of an assessor or guide. It should be noted that in order to be a good guide or assessor, both roles should become familiar to the trainee. A good guide knows what the assessment is really about; a good assessor needs to know how a candidate for an assessment is prepared best.

The key competences of the assessor and guide are:

#### *1. Reviewing*

The assessor or guide 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. S/he can apply these assessment forms integral within a VPL procedure. The assessor 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.

#### *2. Observing*

The assessor or guide is able to adequately observe the participant (if an observation belongs to one of the assessment-instruments) and to link an assessment-report to this observation, in relation to the standard that was used as a basis for the assessment.

#### *3. Interviewing*

The assessor or guide 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 asks questions to investigate the value of the personal experiences (competences, knowledge and skills).

#### *4. Providing feedback*

The assessor is able to provide feedback to the participant in a constructive and motivating way and to indicate the results of the assessment, customised to the level of the participant.

The assessor can explain and substantiate the decisions based on the assessment and indicate at which points the participant is competent. Note that only if this is part of the procedure; however, the guide may also do it.



#### 5. *Written communication*

The assessor is able to write a clear, detailed and structured assessment report. The assessor describes the competences of the participant that are valid for the used standard. Personal characteristics are only added when applicable.

#### 6. *Technical competence*

The assessor or guide is technically competent and must have sufficient professional experience and qualifications in the appropriate discipline. The assessor or guide 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 is familiar with the assessment (VPL) procedure and objectives, the assessment tools and the methodology. The assessor or guide is familiar with the sectorial or company standards (job descriptions, qualification profiles) and has knowledge of the labour market and vocational education programs in respect of the assessment.

### **Design of the assessor training**

The basis of the assessor or guide training consists of six modules, each lasting half a day. The modular design allows, depending on the purpose and the (experience of) the target audience, to skip parts. A separate module is included for the guides in VPL-procedures. Before the training begins, the participants start with making their assessor-portfolio. This portfolio is complemented and updated regularly during the training (and after!) by the assessor-trainee. It may eventually serve as the basis for his or her certification as assessor. Between the training sessions the assessor-trainee performs training assignments.

After the training sessions the trainee receives a certificate of participation and is a candidate for being an assessor/guide. Then the candidate-assessor/guide - if the portfolio is complete and the candidate has conducted enough assessments by him/herself – can complete the training with an external audit. A candidate-assessor/guide has at least acted in two VPL procedures in the role of the second assessor (and/or guide). From that moment the candidate-assessor/guide is eligible for the formal Assessor/Guide Certificate.

### **Training**

Below is the content of the basic modules introduced, incl. the extra module for guide. See appendix 2 for an example of the content of the training-modules.

#### *Module 1: "Towards a competent assessor/guide"*

- Introduction, goal and training program
- The competencies and responsibilities of the assessor and guide
- Competence, competency-based assessment methods and competency tests
- Introduction: assessing competences (observation techniques, methods, etc.)



- An example of a procedure in which competences are assessed against a credit-based standard.

#### *Module 2: "portfolio assessment"*

- Introduction "What is the portfolio"
- Inventory of experiences with assessing portfolios
- The role of the assessor and the guide in assessing the portfolio (assessor versus guide)
- The evidence matrix for assessing the portfolio
- Assessing the portfolio on the basis of the evidence matrix (exercise)
- Tips for portfolio assessment<sup>4</sup>

#### *Module 3: "The criterion based interview"*

- Background criterion-based interview
- Characteristics of a criterion based interview
- Analysing the characteristics of a recorded conversation
- The STARRT<sup>5</sup> interview method, including examples
- Listening – Summarising – Questioning (LSQ)
- First plenary exercise with criterion based interview (carousel)
- Preparation and execution of criterion based interviews in pairs with changing roles
- Plenary feedback exercises
- Tips for criterion based interviews
- Homework assignment: perform and record a criterion-based interview according to the STARRT method.

#### *Module 4: "Performance Assessment"*

- Characteristics of a performance assessment
- Example of a performance assessment (on 'You-Tube')
- The use of assessment-techniques in a performance assessment
- Practicing assessment-techniques

#### *Module 5: "reviewing assessor experiences"*

- Dilemmas of reviewing
- Reviewing and evaluating the own material (film clips with interviews)
- Giving and receiving feedback

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<sup>4</sup> See appendix 3 for examples of different forms of assessment that candidates are trained for.

<sup>5</sup> STARRT stands for: *Situation, Tasks, Activities, Result, Reflection, Transfer*. It is a standardized form for describing a particular learning outcome and also a format for interviewing a candidate on this learning outcome. See appendix 1.



#### *Module 6: "The assessment report"*

- Assessing and reporting findings in a final report
- Giving Feedback
- Looking back at the own log and looking forward to the assessor-certification process (audit)

#### *Module 7: "The role of the guide" (optional)*

- Differences, similarities and dilemmas in the roles of guide versus assessor
- Practising the role of guide in difficult situations
- Going through the entire process of guiding, assessment by the assessor and aftercare

#### *Homework Assignments and course folder*

For day 1: Building the own portfolio, including two competences from the assessor profile.

For day 2: Adding two more competences to the portfolio, studying articles day 1, updating personal log

For day 3: Recording a competence base interview, studying articles day 2, enhancing and complementing portfolio with two competencies, updating log

#### *Course folder*

Participants receive a course folder with background information and instructions and space to build their own portfolio and log.

### **Certification**

#### *Certificate of participation*

After completing the six basic modules of the training, the participant will receive a certificate of participation if the following conditions are met:

- The participant has actively attended all training sessions;
- The participant has actively prepared him- or herself for the meetings by reading the material and recording interviews;
- The participant has much built up the portfolio as much as possible on the basis of assessment-experience and the feedback on these experiences during the training.

When issuing the certificate of participation the institution declares that the participant is competent and capable to start - with an experienced assessor – to perform assessments within the institution. Note that the official examination body is the only body that can award these certificates.



### *Participation in the audit (external certification)*

Start-competent assessors and guides holding a certificate of participation can prepare for the external audit. They can start preparing when meeting the following conditions:

- The start-competent guide has guided a number of personal assessment processes (more than one) in his or her domain (portfolio, simulations, competence based interviews) in which the standard of the assessor/guide training is applied.
- The start-competent assessor has conducted a number of assessments (more than one) in his or her domain (portfolio, simulations, competence based interviews) in which the standard of the assessor training is applied.
- The start-competent assessor has acted at a number of assessments (at least two) as second assessor.
- The start competent assessor has built up a portfolio in which the assessor competences are demonstrated and substantiated with evidence.

### *Preconditions for certification*

In order to train assessors and guides successfully and allow them to finalise the training with an external certification, the following conditions have to be met.

Participants are expected to:

- Have sufficient time available to prepare and visit the sessions;
- Have sufficient time available to practice as a guide and as an assessor within the assessor training and act as a second assessor;
- Build up a portfolio in which they demonstrate their competences in preparation for the audit (external certification).

Participants' organisations are expected to:

- Have a clear image of the alleged qualities of the participants on the basis of the internal profiles to be used as standards.
- Have the participants well informed before they start training and have clarified why the participants are registered as trainees.
- Participants are granted absence-of-leave during the training sessions and allowed time to do their homework and practice the assessments.
- Preferably, several participants from the same team allow entering the assessor/guide-training.



### Required time investment

The diagram below shows the time required to participate in assessor training entails.

Activity	Number of meetings	hours for activity	Total hours
Training Meetings	7	4	28
Preparation for meetings	7	2	14
Filling in journal (log; progress-reporting)	4	1,5	6
			<b>48 hours</b>
Additional modules for assessor/guide			
VPL guide module	1	4	4
Participation in VPL process including preparation, reporting, evaluation	2	20	40
Write reflection report (and/or 360)	2	2	4
Audit / assessment of assessor/guide (including preparation)	1	8	8
			<b>114 hours</b>

### Conclusions

‘The assessor and guide’ are presented in this contribution as the lynchpin between someone’s portfolio – as a personal learning biography and collection of his/her prior formal, informal and non-formal learning outcomes – and the supply (or offer) from a university of lifelong learning programs. Concluding remarks from the ALLinHE perspectives on the value of the training model therefore emphasise the crucial role of assessors and guides in validation-processes. However, assessors and guides also need to bridge the gap between person-steered learning objectives and the flexible supply of lifelong learning.

The training model is intended to respond to these challenges by offering a quality-assured, certified and embedded model for becoming a professional assessor and/or guide. Moreover, it is clear that these two functions in the lifelong learning-arena are crucial for further developing and implementing any offer for lifelong learning in higher education.

It should be noted that the necessary competences to be developed for assessors and guides possibly need to be different according to various reasons such as the kind of organisation, country and the areas where the training is going to be held. Maybe the required competences of assessors and guides for each of the modules do not need to be the same in academic, industrial or financial environments. Also, the requirements of assessors and guides will differ according to whether areas and subjects to be covered in the learning process are related to technical, social or health areas, among others. For those cases where a more accurate profile of the training model is desired, the table



presented in Appendix 4 can be used: here the competences and modules can be found in a cross table and can be set up with ease to define the requirements for each module to be developed by the trainer for the assessors and guides.

No matter what the situation, a successful system for 'validation of prior learning' will be able to open up the traditional learning system. In responding to this challenge, at least three preconditions will have to be met:

*1. An assessment standard aiming at 'a qualifying effect'.* Assessment standards must meet the requirements of validity, acceptance, feasibility and functionality. Standards must be the 'property' of employer and employee. Correspondence with existing national qualification structures for vocational training should be sought. This offers the best possible assurance of the civil effects of qualifications acquired through prior learning assessment procedures, ranging from admissions to and exemptions from particular training courses, to further steps in the career development path. This will help education systems to open up and to respond quickly to required changes. For example, the design of standards for assessment is increasingly competence-driven. The standards are linked both to the competence requirements of professional practice and to the content of the supply of education and training. Cross-sector competencies important to employability can also be defined. The capacity to define these assessment standards will also encourage the development of course-independent tests and examinations. The existing tests are rarely course-independent. Finally, the development of a recognition procedure for assessors creates confidence in the value of the accreditation procedure.

An important condition to create such an open situation is that the standards are made more industry-driven. Ideally, the labour market should decide for itself which competencies are required for accreditation of a practitioner in a particular profession. This relates not only to knowledge but also to skills and attitudes. In this case, the accreditation must be integrated into the corporate strategy.

*2. Quality assurances of the assessment procedures.* In most countries, governments are directly or indirectly responsible for assuring the quality of the assessment standard. The quality of the standard can be controlled by establishing procedures for standard development and by using a programme of requirements for the design of standards (or qualification structures). The key quality criteria are validity, acceptance, functionality, transparency and comparability of structures.

The quality of VPL affects various parties with an interest in the assessment results. The government must supervise the quality (validity, reliability and fairness) of the assessment results. It can delegate these responsibilities to third parties, but remains answerable for quality supervision. The design of the quality assurance system could include an auditing of the assessment centres' internal quality assurance systems (as in the case of ISO certification), together with a system of random investigations of the validity and reliability of assessment results, conducted by independent research institutes. Criteria for the quality of assessment results can be drawn from the general



requirements for assessment: validity and reliability. Naturally, both concepts must be operationalized specifically for prior learning assessment procedures.

3. *Accessibility of procedures.* Prior learning assessment procedures must be accessible to individuals and companies. Accessibility is determined by the recognition and acceptance of the accreditation. It is also determined by the accessibility of the organisations that implement the assessment procedures and their affordability. Access to competence recognition systems is determined by the features of the system itself and by the availability of financial resources. Decentralised supply of assessments increases the accessibility of the system. 'Decentralised' refers to the regional distribution of prior learning assessment and implementation of the procedures at the employee's place of work or training course.

Another condition for accessibility is that the system is workable and efficient for users. Time-consuming and bureaucratic procedures are disastrous to accessibility. The funding of prior learning assessment procedures is a fundamental condition for the use of the system. A decentralised and workable system that nevertheless costs the users too much will reduce access to the procedures.

To conclude, when these three conditions are met, *commitment* can develop fully. There will be plenty of space to build strong commitment for new ways of learning, both within circles of government, education sector and social partners. Commitment after all is the most essential precondition for making use of prior learning assessment and thereby changing the 'looks' of the formal learning system. Commitment means that all parties involved will take up their own responsibility. For the education sector, this will not be easy since learning is traditionally more supply-oriented than demand-oriented. Competence-based learning and prior learning assessment will however make learning more a matter of fun again, since learning will be made more to measure. The motivation of the learners will therefore be much higher. For teachers and schools, this will then also be very stimulating and inspiring. In this sense one could state that learning will not only be a matter of employability but also of *enjoyability*!

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## Appendix 1: The STARRT-form

The STARRT-form has to be filled in for every competence that is assessed in a VPL-procedure.

**STARRT-form for competence:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Title of proof:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Relevant for:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Please, describe short the situation in which the proof of prior learning was produced by answering the questions below. Attach the actual proof to every STARRT-form/competence.**

	Name of activity and/or context:
	Date of the activity:
<b>S</b>	Situation: describe the occasion and the goal of the activity
<b>T</b>	Task: describe the exact task you had and your personal role in it. Also describe whether it was a complex task or not, and how you can proof this.
<b>A</b>	Activities: describe the activity/activities you performed during this task. Be precise on your personal role.
<b>R</b>	Result: describe the result of the task.
<b>R</b>	Reflection: reflect on the impact of the result by the different participants (clients, employer, colleagues/etc.). What happened with the result?
<b>T</b>	Transfer: what was de "learning outcome" for yourself? What would you do the same in a next, similar task and what different? Why?
	References:



## Appendix 2: an example of the training program

### [Example] Module 2 Portfolio Assessment

#### 1. Goal

At the end of the training, participants will have:

- A view on the role they have as an assessor in the assessment of a portfolio;
- Knowledge about the structure of a portfolio;
- Knowledge of the criteria that are set for a portfolio;
- Knowledge of criteria for evidence according to VRAAQ<sup>6</sup> and
- Skill in applying the criteria to a portfolio;
- Skill in analysing a portfolio based on acquired knowledge and experience.

<b>Time:</b>	<b>Programme section:</b>
10 min.	<i>2.1 Discussing programme; Portfolio assessment</i>
30 min.	<i>2.2 Role of the Assessor:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Assessing the portfolio is determining an image in advance from which to be able to make a judgement and arrive at a decision in the IJD;<sup>7</sup></li><li>- The trainer uses sheet nos. .... to give the participant understanding of "good practices" and "bad practices"</li><li>- The trainer explains IJD<sup>8</sup>: getting the picture – making a judgement – taking a decision;</li><li>- Participants are made aware of their own image formation in advance; the trainer makes use of ..... Explain the concept of Objectivity and its application to the portfolio of another assessor;</li></ul>
45 min.	<i>2.3 Structure of a Portfolio.</i> <p>Giving the participant insight into the structure of the portfolio. How is a portfolio constructed? A portfolio is subdivided into components:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Personal data + CV</li><li>2. Motivation</li><li>3. Reflection</li><li>4. Self-assessment:</li><li>5. Overview of the level of competencies</li><li>6. Direct and indirect evidence based on relevant experiences</li></ol> <p>Trainer indicates with respect to points 1 through 6 what is meant by each of them.</p>

6 VRAAQ = Variation, Relevance, Authenticity, Actuality (current) en Quality

7 Criterium Based Interview.

8 IJD = Informing, Judging, Deciding



	<p>Re 1: Trainer displays an anonymized example on a sheet;</p> <p>Re 2: Trainer allows participants to formulate their motivations for taking the assessors' training or course.</p> <p>Re 3: Trainer allows participant to formulate a reflection on the assignment before the start of the training</p> <p>Re 4/5: Participant explains the self-assessment before the start of the training (assignment in pairs)</p> <p>Re 6: Trainer explains the difference between direct and indirect evidence. Participant explains one competency by means of a relevant experience; Discuss in pairs.</p>
15 min.	<b>Break</b>
45 min.	<p><i>2.4 Criteria of portfolio</i></p> <p>Criteria of the course / profession:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>Competencies / indicators (at the stage level)</i></li> </ul> <p>Trainer discusses with the participants what criteria apply to their course. The trainer pays attention to the various courses and their assessment of their competencies and asks what the indicators are.</p> <p>Prior to the assignment, competencies for the assessor are also designated; alternatively, the trainer can choose to take these as a discussion point.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>Other demands on the portfolio and/or interview</i></li> </ul> <p>Trainer initiates a discussion about the further requirements that should be set for a portfolio. Topics such as grammar and the form of the portfolio may be varied. Trainer indicates that uniformity concerning these requirements in advance is important.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>Criteria for evidence</i></li> </ul> <p>Trainer asks the group about experiences in the assessment of portfolios and how they evaluate portfolios based on the criteria of their own training.</p> <p>Trainer explains the criteria we use and shows the Evidence Matrix.</p>
30 min.	<p><i>2.5 Portfolio assessment</i></p> <p>In groups of two or three, participants will assess one detailed set of criteria for competency and set themselves the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What stands out?</li> <li>– What's missing?</li> <li>– What information is missing / needs explanation?</li> </ul> <p>In groups of two or three:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examine the portfolio of a participant from another group.</li> <li>• Use the criteria of self-assessment.</li> <li>• Use the evidence matrix.</li> <li>• What is missing, what information is missing, what raises questions?</li> </ul> <p>Next the trainer discusses the outcomes with the whole group, continually relating the findings back to the evidence matrix.</p>



20 min.	<p><i>2.6 Preparation for IJD</i></p> <p>Trainer gives the following assignment in pairs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determine what information you need to get a good picture of the competencies of the candidate;</li> <li>• Determine what questions you want to ask in the interview next week in the Criteria Based Interview in order to obtain this information.</li> </ul> <p>In so doing, the trainer explains that these questions may be used at the next session.</p>
10 min.	<p><i>2.7 Evaluation of the programme on Portfolio assessment</i></p> <p>What have you learnt from the 1<sup>st</sup> session, what do you think of it? Suggestions for improvement and points you liked for the Trainer. Preview of what are we going to do next week.</p>



### Appendix 3: examples of assessment methods

Testing method	(Digital) Portfolio
<i>Goal</i>	A (digital) portfolio has or may have several objectives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- assessment of the student</li> <li>- supervising the learning process of the student</li> <li>- presentation of the competences by the student (demonstration folder)</li> </ul>
<i>Features</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- preview, reflection and provision of insight into the learning process</li> <li>- authentic picture of the student</li> <li>- room for individual profiling of the student</li> <li>- instrument for demand-driven curricula: based on the learning needs of the student</li> <li>- assessment through various sources that merge into the portfolio</li> <li>- instrument for supervision and assessment</li> <li>- valid</li> <li>- current</li> <li>- dynamic</li> <li>- content-orientated</li> <li>- focussed on learning to learn</li> <li>- rich in evidence of competency</li> <li>- interactive</li> <li>- longitudinal</li> </ul>
<i>Function</i>	Summative and formative
<i>Those involved in the design</i>	Student, fellow student and course
<i>Those involved in the assessment</i>	Student, fellow student, course and possibly field of work
<i>Feedback on the test</i>	Continuous

Testing method	Criterion based interview
<i>Goal</i>	The assessment of competencies by means of past concretely observable behaviour and/or making explicit behaviour shown in the past for evaluation of and reflection on that behaviour by means of a direct questioning methodology (STARR: situation - task - action - result - reflection)
<i>Features</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reasonably valid provided it is structured and based on job analysis</li> <li>- Criteria are made known to the student in advance</li> </ul>



	- Quality of interview is strongly dependent on the qualities of the interviewer
<i>Function</i>	Summative
<i>Those involved in the design</i>	Course and possibly student(s)
<i>Those involved in the assessment</i>	Trained interviewers who can apply the STARR method.
<i>Feedback on the test</i>	Using multiple criteria, feedback on actions and/or competencies of the student.

<b>Testing method</b>	<b>Case study</b>
<i>Goal</i>	Assessment of the level of knowledge and skills of a student by means of a problem or case description, which invokes the problem-solving skills of the student.
<i>Features</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Problem or case study, drawn from professional practice</li> <li>- Generic higher vocational education competencies are evaluated</li> <li>- Occupation-specific knowledge is tested</li> <li>- Can be part of a test of knowledge or OAT (Overall Test)</li> <li>- Stimulates multidisciplinary and creative thinking of the student</li> </ul>
<i>Function</i>	Summative
<i>Those involved in the design</i>	Teachers/test designers using information from the field of work
<i>Those involved in the assessment</i>	Teachers/test designers and possibly the field of work and/or fellow students
<i>Feedback on the test</i>	Result, usually in the form of a grade. Possibly a follow-on discussion or final interview with explanation of: quality of analysis of the student, quality of problem solving, working method of the student.

<b>Testing method</b>	<b>Simulation</b>
<i>Goal</i>	Measurement of one or more competencies in a realistic but standardised situation.
<i>Features</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Simulated real working environment in role play</li> <li>- Directed at client-orientated competencies</li> <li>- Standardised situation</li> <li>- Approximates the authentic situation</li> <li>- Requires a great deal of preparation</li> </ul>



	- Different types of simulations: the simulator, the simulated interview, simulation by computer and simulation by actor (Bergsma, 2003).
<i>Function</i>	Summative
<i>Those involved in the design</i>	Course teachers and field of work
<i>Those involved in the assessment</i>	Trained observers who assess using a list of criteria
<i>Feedback on the test</i>	A score that can be included in the portfolio and for the Personal Development Plan and Personal Action Plan.



## Appendix 4: Table for defining the trainer's requirements according to the training process to be given

<b>Competences of the trainer</b>	Module 1 <i>Towards competent assessors /guides</i>	Module 2 <i>Portfolio assessment</i>	Module 3 <i>Criterion based interview</i>	Module 4 <i>Performance assessment</i>	Module 5 <i>Reviewing assessor experiences</i>	Module 6 <i>Assessment report</i>	Module 7 <i>Role of the guide</i>
Managing							
Presenting							
Learning							
Guiding							
Commitment and conviction							
Applying professionalism							
Attention and understanding							
Ethics and integrity							
Management of needs and expectations of the "customer" (focus)							
Speaker							
Leader							
Coach							
Organizer							
Advisor							
Developer							







# From valuation to validation: competence-based approaches for career planning

# 4

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## The perspective of a bottom-up stakeholder in Switzerland

Anita Calonder Gerster

### Introduction

Europe hosts a variety of initiatives and systems that strengthen the empowerment of its citizens and promote their marketability. In the context of European-wide strategies on lifelong learning and validation of learning outcomes competence-based approaches, this issue has become highly crucial.<sup>9</sup> In 2009, the European Commission for Employment and Social Affairs identified the future demand on “New skills for New Jobs”. In its report of 2010 to the EU Commission, the group of experts stated:

*“We must strongly encourage individuals and employers to invest more heavily in their skills development, not only to secure the best ‘value for money’ but to reap the benefits of people’s potential. [...] We need to persuade more people and organisations that their future prosperity depends on broadening skills and raising skill levels”.*<sup>10</sup>

This underlines the importance of a sustainable culture of competence both in education and in the working world. When looked at in the light of competence culture, this is not only associated with educational challenges but also with economic opportunities, since it is meeting both the individual interests of students and learners and the staff policy requirements of organisations.

Valuation and validation of informal and non-formal learning is a major issue of common understanding in the process of individuals’ empowerment. Building bridges from the valuation of individual learning processes to the validation of outcomes presupposes both the will to establish adequate and appropriate structures and frameworks, as well as the cooperation of bottom-up and top-down stakeholders to the benefit of learners

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9 European Commission, DG Education and Culture and The European Centre for Development of Vocational Training Cedefop (ed). (2010). *2010 update of the European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning - Final Report*.

10 European Union. (2010). *New Skills for New Jobs: Action Now*. A report by the Expert Group on New Skills for New Jobs prepared for the European Commission February 2010. See also: *Neue Kompetenzen für neue Beschäftigungen: Kernbotschaften*. Documents on the topic. URL: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=822&langId=de>.



and applicants. This includes exploring ways to link existing developments to carry out necessary improvements. The empowerment of individuals faced with increasing changes in social and economic systems remains a main focus of these arrangements.

Since the adoption of the 2002 Federal action for vocational and professional education and training, Switzerland has opened the doors to recognise a combination of both competencies and qualifications.<sup>11</sup>

### **Initial situation at national level**

In Switzerland, the validation procedure is standardised and defined at national level by the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI). This ensures a strong link between the formal vocational qualifications system and the individual pathways through learning and work experience. Validation can take into account any kind of learning and no restriction is made regarding how or where candidates have acquired their competences. However, the major part of the competences that are assessed and recognised in the course of validation procedures stems from work experience. A smaller element is based on voluntary or honorary activities or additional jobs. It is the responsibility of the professional organisations that supervise the Vocational Education and Training (VET) and issue formal diplomas to ensure adequate links between the formal system and the labour market. In this regard they have to carry out tasks that are determined by the Federal action for vocational and professional education and training, among them the development of competence or qualification profiles in their specific field.

The Validation of non-formal and informal learning is a joint task of the Confederation, the cantons and professional organisations. The cantons implement the validation procedures in specific professional sectors based on national standards. For example, this has been realised in the training of health care assistants (Canton of Zurich), where the procedure allowed the Canton to tackle an urgent shortage of skilled personnel. The procedure that was implemented led to a Federal VET-Certificate, at a secondary level. To achieve it, candidates must have worked at least five years in the health care sector.

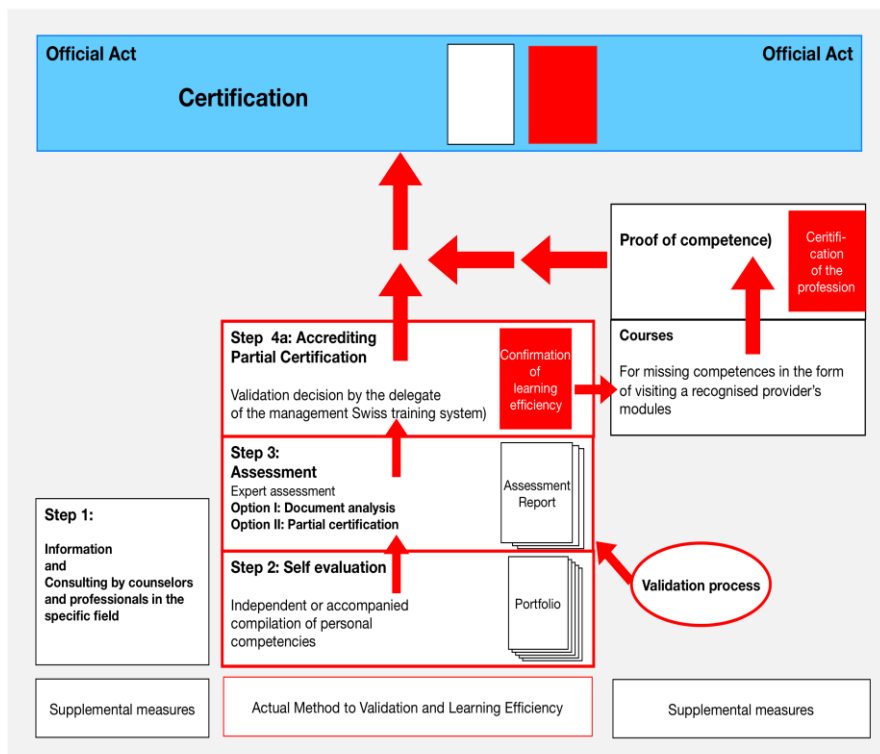
The professional organisations which do not have yet a validation procedure are called upon to develop and implement VET regulations (secondary level) and core curricula for higher vocational education (tertiary B level). The Cantons are expected to adapt the existing validation procedures to further professional areas. There are attempts and discussions in progress about the general integration of Higher Education (tertiary level) into the validation

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11 Staatssekretariat für Bildung, Forschung und Innovation SBFI (Hrsg) (2002). *Bundesgesetz über die Berufsbildung (BBG)*. Bern



Figure 1: Validation procedure



### Key legislation

The key provisions of the validation procedure in the Federal Act on Vocational and Professional Education and Training include:

- Art. 9 Section 2: experiential learning and vocational or general skills that were acquired outside the formal education and training system are accredited appropriately.
- Art. 17 Sec. 5: basic VET can also be achieved through non-formalised learning; this process leads to a qualification procedure.
- Art. 33: professional qualifications are assessed through a final exam, a combination of tests or other forms of qualification procedures that are accredited by the Federal Office (OPET).

### Development and implementation of measures

In 2004 the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) launched the national platform of "Validation of Learning". The SERI platform included important stakeholders on all levels: authorities and executive bodies, social partners (employers, trade unions), organisations in education and vocational training, specialists and experts.



Together they initiated different projects at a cantonal level. Acting as a stakeholder responsible for the quality and control in the area of self-evaluation of individual management of competencies, the CH-Q Association was a member of this platform.

In 2007 the platform members adopted the National Guidelines on “Validation of Learning” issued by the SERI<sup>12</sup>. Although they were restricted to the basic vocational training, Higher Education institutions used them as a basis for developing validation approaches. On a national level, a well-established validation procedure in Higher Education is the “Equivalence assessment for the acquisition of the Federal Professional Education and Training (PET) Diploma in Adult Education and Training” (Type B tertiary level, referred to in Switzerland as professional education and training PET). The procedure is closely linked with the modular train-the-trainer system run by the national umbrella organisation Swiss Federation for Adult Learning (SFAL/SVEB).

In 2008, policy makers within the platform decided that its main goals were fulfilled and dissolved it.

### **The CH-Q System of managing competencies - links between valuation and validation of competencies and qualifications**

#### *Origins*

The CH-Q System of Managing Competencies emerged from a national initiative in education taken in the early 1990s. It led to a four year project, supported by the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI). The main targets of the initiative were flexibility of the educational system and equivalence of formal and informal learning. In that context, a specific approach was at stake that allowed the identification, assessment and recognition of skills and competencies.

The CH-Q Association - Swiss Qualification Program for Career Development - was subsequently set up in 1999 as a non-profit umbrella organisation in order to manage, expand and promote the development and implementation of such an approach. The quality assurance approach required a separation of roles. Thus the CH-Q Association decided not to act as a provider but to concentrate on exercising strategic, political, and structural functions. In the pursuit of its objectives, the CH-Q Association could - and still can - count on direct or indirect support from authorities, associations and institutions at national and regional levels.

According to a statement in the National Guidelines on “Validation of Learning” issued by the SERI, the long-term action of the CH-Q Association has helped - together with two other umbrella organisations - to prepare the ground towards a rapid implementation of the Validation of Prior Learning in Switzerland. The early involvement in processes and procedures of formal and informal learning and the continuous development of the System of Managing Competencies, have then led the CH-Q Association to participate in various VPL-projects at national and international levels.

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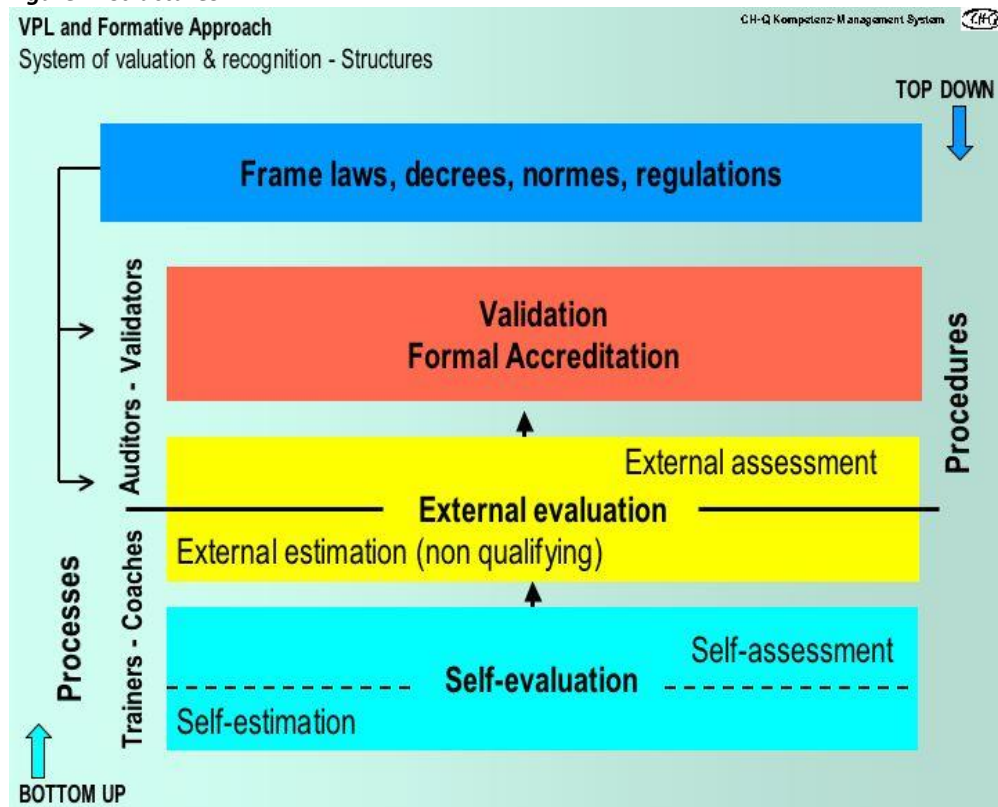
12 Staatssekretariat für Bildung, Forschung und Innovation SBFI. (2007). (ed). *Validierung von Bildungsleistungen – Nationaler Leitfaden Berufliche Grundbildung*. Bern.



## Structures and stakeholders

The main activities of the CH-Q Association are focused on self-evaluation processes. They might lead to validation procedures even though summative outcomes are less considered as a final goal. So far, validation procedures have worked as a top down approach. The possibility that people may “value” the learning process brings the bottom-up approach into focus. The question is to balance the two approaches. The challenge is to establish the right structures to ensure a proper implementation. In 2004 the CH-Q Association built an orientation grid for possible structures and for assigning the respective processes, procedures, resources and responsible players. It illustrates the interplay between competency management and the recognition and validation of prior learning with its associated tools.<sup>13</sup> The following two figures illustrate this work.

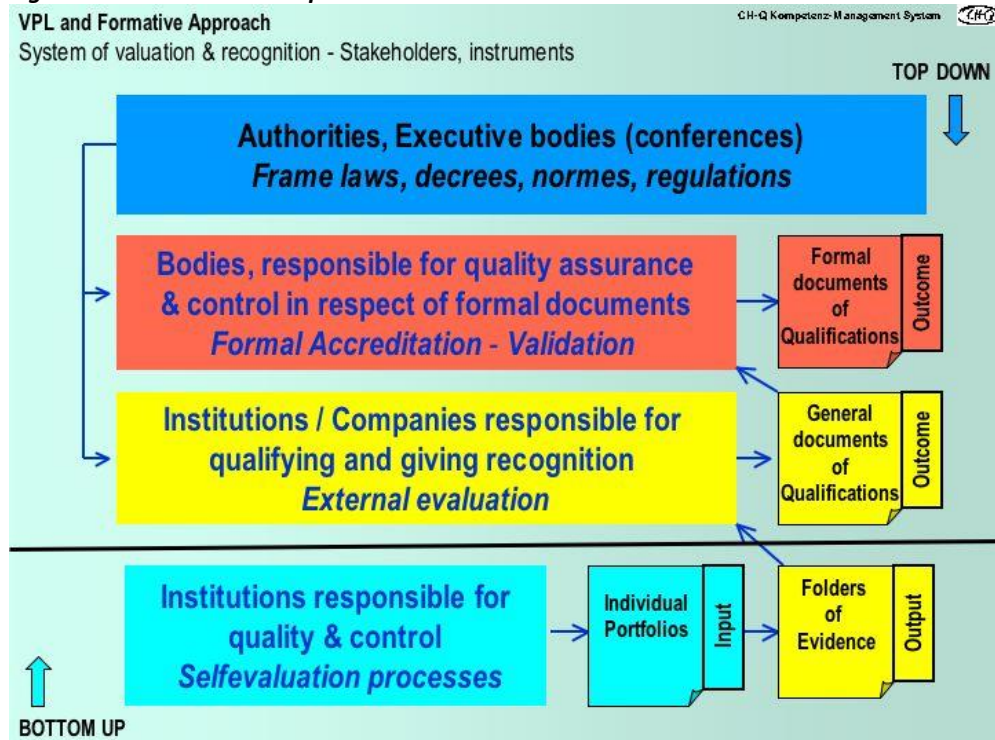
**Figure 2: structures**



13 Calonder Gerster, A., Hügli, E.. Von der Selbsteinschätzung von Kompetenzen zur formellen Ankerkennung und Validierung. In: *Berufsbildung in Wissenschaft und Praxis*, 1/2004. Bonn: BIBB.



**Figure 3: Stakeholders and products**



### Goals

The CH-Q Association Swiss Qualification Program for Career Development works with partners to develop and establish solutions for *the management of competencies* on an individual level. Together, they create the conditions for specific career development, enabling young people and adults to adapt to a changing education, training and socio-economic system using their own initiative, to increase their professional flexibility and mobility; equally, they ensure sustainability in lifelong learning. The central focus is to take into account existing strengths, and to convert them into qualifications.

One of the most important tasks is to keep sight of the complexity of these competence-based objectives. It is about recognition of performance and achievement in different areas of life. This includes achievements in the family, in volunteer work, in civic activities. The CH-Q Association is especially involved in giving these objectives a better chance in education at each stage and in the workplace. To achieve these goals and to create a dynamic culture of competence, the CH-Q Association develops fundamentals, strategies and frameworks. The CH-Q label stands for leading edge quality - in Switzerland and abroad, with partner organisations in five European countries.



## Frame of Reference

The recognition of prior learning can be divided into several steps involving different tasks.<sup>14</sup> In Switzerland, they are defined in the National Guidelines on “Validation of Learning”. To create a dynamic *culture of competence*, the CH-Q Association has developed fundamentals, and frameworks which determine the CH-Q System of Managing Competencies. The elements of the system include:

- Regulations and Guidelines (standards, principles) defining the requirements for implementation in education, training, career guidance and in the world of work. These documents are in line with the National Guidelines on „Validation of Learning”,
- Qualification (training) program with modules,
- System of quality assurance.

### *Concept for training and career guidance*

The implementation of the system is up to the providers (education institutions, administration, labour market). They are responsible for the adaption and application of the methods, processes and procedures at an operational level in line with their particular needs and in accordance with the quality criteria of the CH-Q Association.

The essential element in assuring quality is the qualification of the trainers and counsellors. The training program is modular by design and integrated in the system of certification and accreditation. It implies the awarding of certificates on three levels (users and professional trainers and consultants) and of an additional qualification at level four. As a second step, there is recognition of programs developed by certified trainers and counselors at level three which leads to acquiring the label CH-Q.

### *Costs per beneficiary*

The provider determines the costs. They are generally adapted to the price of the market. Either the beneficiary pays the fee himself or herself or the employer covers the costs.

### *Target groups*

The training programs and counseling and guidance services offered are basically designed for a broad range of users irrespective of their personal background, educational level, occupation or social status.

The programs focus on supporting young people and adults who are

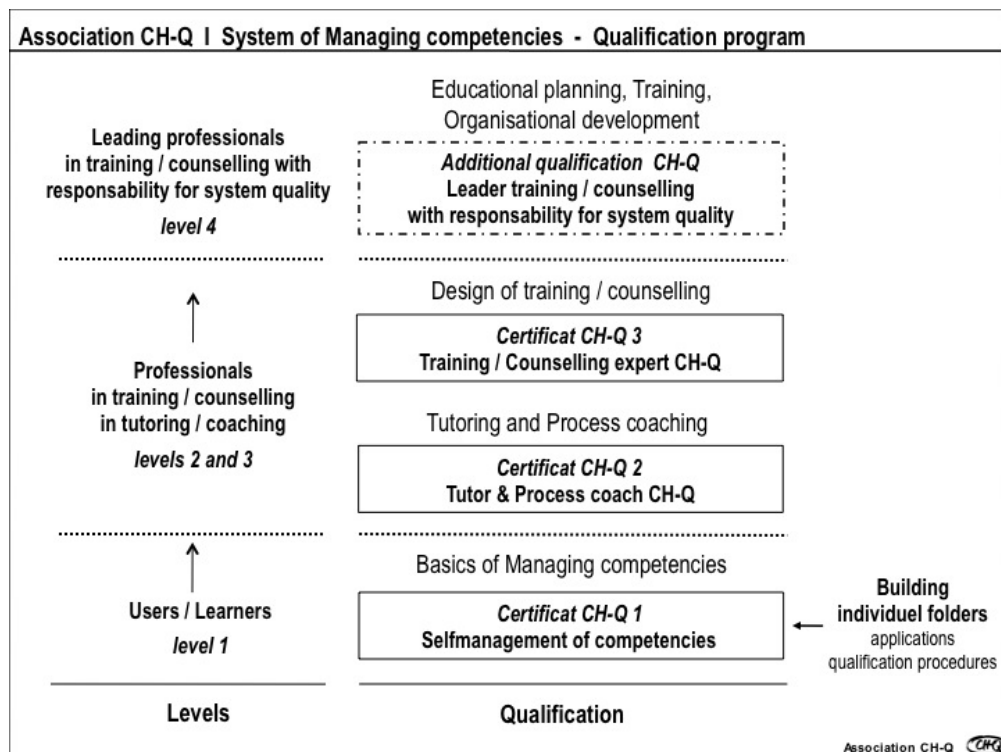
- Attending school, as part of mandatory or post- mandatory schooling,
- In vocational and continuing education or training,
- At the dividing line between school/education-job, non-employment-employment or re-entry into the labour market,
- Integrated in the labour market.

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14 Gutschow, K. (2010). *Anerkennung von nicht formal und informell erworbenen Kompetenzen*. In Wissenschaftliche Diskussionspapiere. Vol 118. Bonn: Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung (BiBB).



**Figure 4: Qualification program for users and professionals**



### Products/Instruments

All products fit into the conceptual framework and are characterised by:

- Coherence: all parts are aligned with each other and are mutually complementary (unity of doctrine) based on a common, unified language (identity),
- Orientation towards users and practical applicability: products are geared towards the needs of target groups, they take into account research findings in academic disciplines, reflect developments in education, business management, cultural affairs,
- Modular design: flexible and easy networking with other existing programmes, tools, concepts in the respective field of application kick-off instruments for easy application.
- A variety of Instruments such as:
  - o Folders for documenting the personal strengths and abilities (Portfolio-instruments). They are designed as a three-part portfolio for young people and adults (print and electronic version):
    - *Folder of competencies* as a continuous collection of information and facts on acquired skills and competencies,



- *Folder of qualifications* as a collection of formal and informal evidence and supporting documents, e.g. diplomas, certificates, references,
- *Folder of application* as a summary of selected professional stations and providing an overview of the current individual competence profile in order to match the requirements of jobs, of admission- or promotion procedures.
- Instruments for validation and accreditation procedures,
- Guidelines/manuals for competence-based training and guidance.

#### *Concept for quality assurance and control*

The Commission of Qualification and Recognition is responsible for ensuring the quality of the training and for verifying the appropriateness of the programs developed by the providers. To this end, they control the acquired qualifications on level 1-3 and the evidence of quality of the programs developed for level 1 by the providers. Both procedures are based on written documents. These are first evaluated by especially assigned experts and then validated by the members of the Commission.

#### *Reviewing the ongoing development of programs and tools*

Programs are periodically monitored for their effectiveness and for the tools they include. To achieve this, experts from the labour market, education, vocational training and applied research co-operate with the CH-Q Association.

### **Conclusion**

When it comes to the assessment and formal validation of competencies or skills measurements these procedures are elements within comprehensive systems of quality assurance. Conversely, when non-regulated processes of competence development are subject to discussion, these are rooted, as ever, in a minimal basic concept. This occurs despite the fact that the strengthening of competencies offers added value and makes a sustainable difference that benefits working people and individuals. What are the reasons behind this difference? In education, the assessment and validation of competencies is integrated in a compensation system of awarding scores, points, credits and degrees - the performance and its results are made visible in the qualifications achieved. By contrast, the appreciation and valuation of individual performances outside hard indicators or measuring factors are based on a system of developing competencies whose impacts are not explicitly evident.

In the 1990s the formal recognition of learning outcomes in Switzerland (*reconnaissance des acquis*) was not legalised. Nevertheless, the proceedings leading to an informal valuation and to the awarding of unofficial certificates within proven frames of quality assurance by well-reputed institutions were gaining in importance. This happened for good reasons: the call to bring greater flexibility into vocational training and improve permeability within education provided a point of reference for the yet-to-be-developed validation of informally acquired competencies. Bottom-up organisations were the first to bring to the attention of decision makers, experts and finally the general public the



social and economic importance of valuing and recognising non-formal and informal learning. The notion that competencies are fundamental for qualifications was strong. Equally, the legal anchoring of validation procedures and the Europe-wide advance of credit transfer systems over recent years has led to a significant counter-development: the trend to collect qualifications was and still is constantly rising, while interest in programs promoting the development of competencies and the empowerment of learners have become less important.

Yet for some time now, there are indications of movements signaling a reversal of this situation. The key messages in the report “The New Skills for New Jobs” prepared for the EU-Commission in February 2010 opened in these words: “Upgrading, adapting and widening the skills portfolio of individuals to create and fill the jobs of tomorrow is one of the greatest challenges facing Europe today.<sup>15</sup> This means nothing less than the indispensable linking of competencies and qualifications, of valuation and validation and lastly the logical step in paving the way for a competence-oriented culture in education and the working world.

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15 European Union. (2010). *New Skills for New Jobs: Action Now*. A report by the Expert Group on New Skills for New Jobs prepared for the European Commission February 2010.



## Developing a training program for RPL-professionals in South Korea

# 5

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Dae Joong Kang, Jung Hyun Kim & Hyeryung Jung

As South Korea tries to link higher education with lifelong learning more, it is imperative to introduce a tool to recognise individual learners' prior learning experience. Higher education institutes in South Korea are often resistant to taking active measures to do this as they have served mainly young adults who were just graduated from high schools. They do not see any need to take care of adults who have much learning experience from their work, family, and social lives. However, from 2018 colleges and universities in South Korea face up with a reality that they are not able to fill the freshmen quota due to low birth rate. South Korea is rapidly becoming an aging society. Recently, the Ministry of Education announced that there will be a structural adjustment of higher education including a decrease of more than a hundred thousand freshmen. To many college and universities, it is a matter of life and death if registration fees reduce dramatically. Therefore, many universities are looking for new resources for survival; adults with no college degree or those seek a second or third degree may provide a viable solution. Modifying to become lifelong learning institutes requires many changes. One such change is introducing a system of recognising prior learning for adults. In order for college and universities to implement this system without difficulties, the role of professionals in charge of the system is essential.

The South Korean government has become interested in the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) to establish a link system between work and learning and to increase the role of lifelong education in higher education institutes (HEIs) (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2011; Ministry of Education, 2013). The HEIs may open their doors to non-traditional adult learners in regard to outcomes of non-formal and informal learning in the workplace, recognised through RPL and accepted as credits. In addition, HEIs may provide counseling and career development paths for each individual learner through the RPL. RPL may play an important role as a lever in re-establishing the function of HEIs in the emerging learning society. To implement RPL in HEIs it is important to establish the operational body but the expertise among the responsible personnel should not be overlooked. The person identified as the RPL-professional in colleges and universities plays a role in organising the outcomes of various learning by the learner with assessable methods and linking to the curriculum in related departments. That person is required to have knowledge about experiential learning, administrative procedures and curriculum in the university, as well as expertise as an evaluator.



Some studies have emphasised the RPL-professionals' roles as mentors, assessors, and advisors to support RPL candidates in higher education (HE) (Andersson and Harris, 2006; Conrad and Wardrop, 2010; Hoffmann and Michel, 2010). They play important and different roles in supporting and assessing RPL candidates through the RPL process. In this sense, RPL-professionals' capabilities can be one of the critical factors for successful implementation of the RPL system in the field. The training of RPL-professionals can be especially important for a country like South Korea that has just introduced RPL.

Actually, most of countries that have implemented RPL for decades have trained RPL-professionals with a qualification system. European Union (EU) member countries, the US and Canada have developed and implemented training programs for the RPL-professional. The EU published the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning (2009) and guided its member countries. Various EU-funded research projects, including the Access to Lifelong Learning in Higher Education (ALLinHE), aimed to widen access to HE through validation of prior learning (VPL)<sup>16</sup>. One of the ALLinHE project's goals was to establish the international VPL-professional network. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) in the US and the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) have also nurtured VPL-professionals through their own training programs.

South Korea has been recognising non-formal and informal learning through the policy programs like the Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS) and Lifelong Learning Account System (LiLAs) (Choi et al., 2006; South Korean Educational Development Institute, 2007, 2008). ACBS and LiLAs assess and accredit education programs and grant credits to those who have completed those education programs (National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2013). It does not directly assess the competences acquired by the learner as a result of learning. In South Korea, RPL is emerging in the context that non-formal and informal learning should be recognised and accepted officially on the individual basis (Lee, 2013; Jung et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2011). RPL has been also emerged as important with the establishment of the National Competency Standards (NCS) in South Korea (Lee et al., 2008; Kim, 2005).

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the RPL-professional training program developed in South Korea. As South Korea is in its early stage of incorporating RPL in higher education, we aimed to develop a professional training program. Firstly, we investigated the training programs in Europe, US and Canada, consulted adult and higher education experts, and surveyed university officials to develop training program suitable to South Korean context. Secondly, we carried out a survey to understand the training demands for RPL-professionals. The survey covered 82 departments in 16 colleges and universities. 15 colleges and universities were funded by the Ministry of Education as they participated in the Lifelong Learning-centered University Project administered by

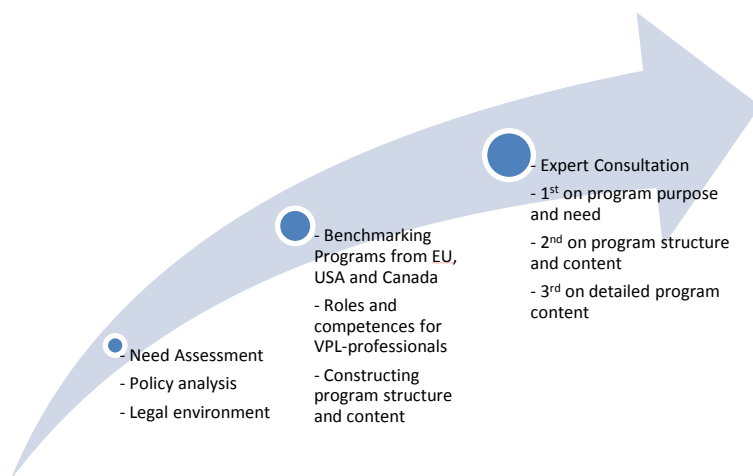
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16 In this chapter, we prefer RPL in describing South Korean practice while using VPL as a global terminology.



the National Institute for Lifelong Education as of 2013. Although Korea National Open University did not join in the project, it was included in the survey since it mainly serves non-traditional adult learners in South Korea. Overall, it was found that there was a high demand for RPL experts and training programs. Experiential learning theory, working life and learning, workplace learning, the RPL system, and interview technique with the learner were the topics that respondents wanted to include in the training program. Thirdly, we ran a consulting group of ten experts in the field of adult and higher education. We asked the group to review the validity of the selected competences of RPL-professionals, purpose and content of the developing program, and feasibility of the final program. As a result, we proposed a three-stage 100-hour training program based on the key competences of RPL-professionals.

Fig. 1: Development process of the education program



### **Benchmark of International VPL-professional Training Program**

Countries that have implemented VPL early have operated professional training programs. We investigated the cases in the U.S. and Canada with a long history of the VPL under different titles and the case in the EU where interest in VPL has recently increased rapidly.

#### *Prior Learning Assessment Certificate Program: The United States*

The United States introduced VPL to provide opportunities in college education for World War Two veterans by assessing their experience in military service. VPL is called 'Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)' in the US and was fully activated in 1974 with the establishment of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). The CAEL is a non-profit organisation and has played a leading role in establishing VPL policies, support and quality management.

CAEL clearly states that all the personnel involved in PLA shall receive proper training to



develop expertise. This leads CAEL to operate the Prior Learning Assessment Certificate program and it frequently holds webinars and offline workshops. The PLA certificate program is the only one for PLA personnel and administrators in the U.S. Various people like university advisors, professors, PLA program operators, training managers, entrepreneurs, administrators, vocational program developers and graduate students have taken the program.

CAEL consigns and operates the PLA certificate program to DePaul University and the university operates the program online as a part of the Continuing Professional Education Program. The program consists of four workshops and it takes a total of six months to complete all the workshops, with five to seven hours per week on average to take the workshop. The PLA certificate program also implements prior learning assessment. The introductory workshop is a course for those who have never – or almost never - experienced PLA and the person who has enough experience may directly register for the second workshop through consultation with the program manager. Each workshop is held twice or three times a year. Specific contents for each workshop are listed in the Table 1.

Table 1. Prior Learning Assessment Certificate Program

Module	Purposes and Contents	Time and Fee	Assessment
PLA Workshop 1	<p>◆ Goals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Determining college level learning form experience</li> <li>- Discriminating between college level and pre-college level learning</li> <li>- Conducting proper assessments of student learning</li> <li>- Advising/guiding students in preparing evidence for assessment of learning</li> </ul> <p>◆ Topics: Introductory of PLA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learning from experience: the premise of PLA</li> <li>- Identifying creditable learning from experience</li> <li>- Advising students in the identification and preparation of assessable evidence of learning</li> <li>- The Standards of Prior Learning Assessment</li> <li>- The steps of assessing prior learning</li> <li>- Educational and philosophical decisions that accompany PLA</li> </ul>	4 weeks (\$700)	No examination



PLA Workshop 2	<p>◆ Goals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Determining college level learning from experience</li> <li>- Discriminating between college and pre-college level learning</li> <li>- Conducting assessments of student learning that employ CAEL principles and standards</li> <li>- Guiding students in preparing evidence for assessment of learning</li> </ul> <p>◆ Topics: Steps and Practices of PLA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identification, articulating, measurement, evaluation and transcription of creditable learning from experience</li> <li>- Accepted models of relating assessed learning to credit</li> <li>- Framing learning outcomes</li> <li>- Perspectives on the meaning of college-level learning</li> <li>- Decision points in both assessing learning and the formation of an assessment program</li> <li>- Linkages among assessment, learning and feedback</li> </ul>	7weeks (\$825)	Upon completing the first two workshops and the examination, you will be awarded a Certificate of Professional Achievement as a Prior Learning Assessor.
PLA Workshop 3	<p>◆ Goals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Creating alignment from purpose to practices</li> <li>- Sustaining consistency across policies</li> <li>- Communicating expectations to all involved</li> <li>- Financing a program</li> <li>- Being aware of –and meeting- accreditation expectations</li> </ul> <p>◆ Topics: Administering and Assuring Quality of PLA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Articulating program purpose(s)</li> <li>- Personnel roles and responsibilities</li> <li>- Boundaries, Costs and pricing</li> <li>- Training and organizational development, Continuous improvement</li> </ul>	5weeks (\$700)	No examination
PLA Workshop 4	<p>◆ Goals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Integrate the relevant ideas, practices and decisions from the preceding three</li> </ul>	4weeks (\$700)	Upon completing all four workshops,



	workshops - Draft a workable plan to implement or improve a PLA program in your organization ◆ Topics: Formulating a Plan for the establishment or improvement of PLA - Guidelines for designing a PLA program - Guidelines for improving a PLA program		you will be awarded a Certificate of Mastery in Prior Learning Assessment.
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### *PLAR professional training programs in Canada*

Prior Learning Assessment (PLAR) professional training programs in Canada are operated by the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA). The CAPLA was established in 1994 and became a non-profit organization in 1997. It operates the learning network among members ([RecognitionForLearning.ca](http://RecognitionForLearning.ca)) and proposes the roles and the competence of the PLAR professionals in Canada. CAPLA analysed the tasks of the PLAR professionals and developed their roles and competence in 2002.

Table 2: IPTW program in Manitoba, Canada

Level	Topics	Contents
1	Essential Skills and RPL	Day 1 - Introduction of the nine Essential Skills (ES) <sup>17</sup> and its importance Day 2- The value of RPL, Advantages and power of Portfolios, Counseling/advisory skills in RPL, etc.
2	Building Portfolios	Day 1 – How to build a portfolio for oneself (the benefits of portfolio building, 5 Steps to portfolio building etc.) Day 2 – How to coach a client to build his/her own portfolio
3	Essential Skills and Portfolio	Day 1 – The skill of self-reflection, how to use self-reflection when identifying the nine Essential Skills, how to write an Essential Skills Profile, how to interview someone in order to assess their Essential Skills Day 2 – Practicing Essential Skills profile development
4	Empowered to use one's voices proudly	Day 1 – How to develop a tailored resume for a specific job, how to develop Essential Skills Profiles specific to a job description, how to creatively turn a learning resource into an interactive teaching tool, etc. Day 2 – Opportunity to hear Human Resource (HR) professionals discuss job interview, how to create resume, other important aspects in looking for a job, etc.

17 Nine Essential Skills are: 1) Reading Text, 2) Document Use, 3) Writing, 4) Numeracy (Math), 5) Oral Communication, 6) Working with Others, 7) Computer Use, 8) Thinking Skills, 9) Continuous Learning.



State governments and HEIs in Canada operate the training programs based on the roles and the competences of the PLAR professionals. A typical program run by the state government is the Igniting the Power Within (ITPW) program in Manitoba. The ITPW is a qualification program for Canadian aborigines who are relatively marginalised from educational opportunities. The program is composed of four levels of two-day workshops. It has granted certificates to more than 1,000 people in Canada since it started in 2005. The program contains not only the contents of the RPL implementation but also upgrading of nine core basic competences of Canada<sup>18</sup> for RPL professionals. The program covers the RPL-professional in universities as well as vocational counselors, social workers, employment consultants, employment and training personnel.

The program run by Red River College (RRC) in Manitoba is another exemplary training course for PLAR professionals in Canada. The course is a continuing professional education program and consists of six courses and the total training time is 300 hours.

Table 3: Red River College's RPL Practitioner Certificate Program

Course Name	Course Description	Course hours	Method	Cost
PLAR-1200 RPL Foundation	Goal: Acquire the fundamental knowledge and skill to effectively implement RPL/PLAR - Learn about basic principles of RPL/PLAR - How to develop learning outcomes, sound assessment practices, the portfolio and other methods of assessment - The role of the advisor, assessor and facilitator and how to put RPL into context for development of credible system	40	On-line	\$539
			On-campus	\$529
PLAR-1201 RPL Practitioner-Advanced	Goal: Learn about adult learner focused organizations, innovation and quality in RPL - How RPL supports adult learning and encourages organizational change - Explore the roles of the advisor, assessor and facilitator and the processes and practices to maintain quality in RPL systems.	60	On-line	\$689

18 The 9 core competencies in Canada are text reading, writing, using documents, mathematics, using computers, thinking, working with others, communication and continuous learning.



PLAR-1202 RPL Special Issues	<p>Goal: Learn about the key issues in RPL practice, new innovative practices and trends in the RPL field</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gain experience with the development of project management skills</li> <li>- Exploration of current research</li> <li>- Implementation of RPL professional development</li> <li>- Qualification recognition</li> <li>- Explore additional related topics in the RPL field</li> </ul>	50	On-line	\$579
PLAR-1205 RPL Independent Study	<p>Goal: the successful completion of relevant courses, workshops, seminars or other professional education related to RPL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners may choose a subject in their field of practice or interest</li> <li>- Learners may transfer in an approved credit from another post-secondary institution</li> </ul>	40		-
PLAR-2002 Train The Trainer - Portfolio	<p>Goal: Learn about the development of a professional portfolio and the strategies for group facilitation of the portfolio development process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners will develop their own portfolios</li> <li>- Learn key strategies to facilitate professional portfolio development with learners and clients</li> </ul>	30	On-campus	\$429
PLAR-1203 Practicum	<p>Goal: Gain hands-on experience through the 80 hr. practicum</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Prerequisites: PLAR-1200, PLAR-1201, PLAR-1202, PLAR-1205, PLAR-2002</li> <li>- Or, Choose PLAR-1204 RPL Capstone</li> </ul>	80		-
PLAR-1204 RPL Capstone	<p>Goal: Demonstrate learning from work and life experience (i.e., minimum 2000 hours/2+years) in the RPL field through a Capstone project or complete a RPL process to prove prior learning for the Practicum/Capstone Project component of the Certificate</p>	80		-

\* All the courses are offered both on-line and on-campus. The delivery method and required cost shown in the table are illustrated in the website as of November 2013.



### *EU ALLinHE Assessors and Guiders Training Program*

The project Access to Lifelong Learning in Higher Education (ALLinHE) describes the VPL-professional as assessors and guides. It proposes reviewing, interviewing, feedback provision and communication through documents as key competences. The training program to develop these competences consists of seven modules.

Table 4: Major contents of the VPL-professional training program provided by ALLinHE

Module	Contents
Introduction	Introduction of ALLinHE Introduction of VPL principles and procedures
Module 1: Towards a competent assessor	Introduction, goal and training program The competence and responsibilities of the assessor (and guider) Competence, competency-based assessment methods and competency tests Introduction: Assessing competences
Module 2: Portfolio Assessment	Introduction "What is the portfolio" Inventory of experiences with assessing portfolios The role of the assessor in assessing the portfolio (assessor versus guider) The evidence matrix for assessing the portfolio Assessing the portfolio on the basis of the evidence matrix (exercise) Tips for portfolio assessment
Module 3: The Criterion based interview	Background and characteristics of a criterion based interview The STARRT (Situation, Task, Action, Result, Reflection, Transfer) interview method, incl. examples Listening, Summarizing, Questioning (exercise) Tips for criterion based interview
Module 4: Performance Assessment	Characteristics and example of a performance assessment The use of assessment-techniques in a performance assessment Practicing assessment-techniques
Module 5: Reviewing assessor experiences	Dilemmas of reviewing Reviewing and evaluating the own material Giving and receiving feedback
Module 6: The assessment report	Assessing and reporting findings in a final report Giving Feedback Looking back at the own log and looking forward to the assessor-certification process
Module 7: The role of the guider (Optional)	Differences, similarities and dilemmas in the roles of guider versus assessor Practicing the role of guider in difficult situations Going through the entire process of guiding, assessment by the assessor and aftercare



The program takes 104 hours of training and self-study. The initial 48 hours focus on understanding the VPL system, and reflecting on participants' own learning experiences and outcomes by writing their own journals, which means that the people not involved in the VPL may join the program easily. The latter 56 hours concentrate on upgrading competences for those who are involved in the VPL tasks.

The VPL-professional training programs mentioned so far provide several suggestions. First, the programs take comprehensive rather than segmented approaches to clarifying the competence and tasks of the VPL-professionals. The VPL-professionals are interviewers, assessors, advisors and administrators at the same time. The U.S., Canada and the EU training programs encompass those roles. VPL is in the professionals' hands from the start to the end. Second, the program is primarily portfolio-oriented. Skills of building and assessing the learner's portfolio are at the core of the training programs. Interview technique is the most important skill. Much time is allocated to the practice of writing the portfolio. Third, the professional training programs are also providing a community of practice that upgrades assessing and guiding capabilities, shares the information and expertise of practitioners, and solves problems from the field collectively. The advanced-level workshop often pays attention to bottom-up approach in organising contents.

### **South Korean RPL-professional training program**

The purpose of the RPL-professional training program is to equip the participant with required competences. Furthermore, it aims to create a learning community that contributes to developing further expertise and practical knowledge. The goals for each level of the program will be described in the next section and here is to propose the roles, competence and tasks of the RPL-professionals. Based on the investigation of the given VPL-professional training programs, we defined the roles and competence of the RPL-professionals as described in Table 5 (Lee et al., 2011; Duvekot, 2011; Kappe, R. Smits and E. Bekker, 2011).

Table 5: Roles and competences of RPL-professionals

Role	Competence	
	Specific Competence	General Competence
Identification and advisement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Understanding adult learners</li> <li>- Understanding assessment criteria</li> <li>- Criteria-based interviewing</li> <li>- Supporting portfolio build-up</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Communication</li> <li>- Personal relation</li> <li>- Resources utilization</li> </ul>
Analysis and assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Portfolio analysis</li> <li>- Professional judgment</li> <li>- High-level of speaking and writing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mathematical reasoning</li> <li>- Information analysis</li> <li>- Understanding and applying</li> </ul>



		technology
Planning and management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Planning skill for the RPL operation</li> <li>- RPL operation skill</li> <li>- Understanding university operation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Self-management and development</li> <li>- Communication</li> <li>- Problem-solving</li> <li>- Organisational understanding</li> </ul>

Anticipated participants of the basic course 1 are those who have a Master's degree in any area of the study since colleges and universities need RPL-professionals with diverse backgrounds. Those who already have work experiences of university assessment and student support and related certificate holders, such as lifelong educator, admission officer, vocational counselor, etc., are also preferred. The basic course 2 is only open to those who completed the basic course 1. The advanced course is open only to those who completed the basic course 2 and have more than one year of RPL practice in the field. The brief description of the program is as follows.

#### *Basic course 1*

- Goal: Achieve theoretical and practical knowledge on RPL and share problems
- Method: Lectures from experts and discussion among participants
- Time: 20 hours. Equivalent to one credit in the standard university curriculum in South Korea
- Assessment: Not required.

Table 6: South Korean RPL-professional training: Basic Course 1

Topic	Contents	Time
Opening	Program purpose and overview	1h
Understanding RPL	RPL policies: Global trends Why RPL? National policy environment RPL system in University Expected outcomes of RPL	6h
Understanding Learning from experience	Formal, informal and non-formal learning RPL and different types of learning Theory and practice of experiential learning	4h
Understanding work from the viewpoint of the workplace learning	Workplace learning theories Workplace learning and changing nature of work	3h
Understanding	University administration for non-traditional	2h



university from the viewpoint of linking Work and Learning	adult learners	
Roles and competences of RPL-professionals	Understanding RPL process Role of RPL-professional Competence requirements for RPL-professional	3h
Closing	Summary of the program and farewell	1h

#### *Basic course 2*

- Goal: Upgrade RPL abilities, upgrade problem-solving ability, deepen the specialty through sharing practical knowledge
- Method: Assignment and discussion, partial lecture
- Time: Total 50 hours. Equivalent to three credits in the standard university curriculum in South Korea.
- Assessment: Evaluation of the assignment

Table 7: South Korean RPL-professional training: Basic Course 2

Topic	Content	Time
Opening	Program purpose and overview	1h
Understanding types of prior learning by experience and adult learners	Types of the prior learning experience Adult learners: Characteristics Adult learning theories	8h
Understanding portfolio	Meaning and function of portfolio of prior learning Components of portfolio Need of interview to express the competences Portfolio: cases and discussion	3h
Writing your own portfolio (practice 1)	Phase 1: self-report based portfolio writing Phase 2: primary interview Phase 3: evidence-based portfolio writing Phase 4: secondary interview Phase 5: competence-based portfolio writing Phase 6: review and feedback	15h
Understanding assessment	Assessment in university curriculum Criteria for academic achievement and qualification Competence-based job analysis	3h



Supporting portfolio writing and assessment (practice 2)	Phase 1: self-report based portfolio writing Phase 2: Primary interview Phase 3: evidence-based portfolio writing Phase 4: Secondary interview Phase 5: portfolio writing for the final assessment Phase 6: writing portfolio assessment report	15h
Quality assurance and communication	RPL committee: organization and operation Portfolio management Internal communication among stakeholders in the university Public relations	2h
Ethics of RPL-professionals	Ethics of RPL-professional Discussion: ethical codes, anticipated issues, etc.	3h
Closing	Award ceremony	1h

#### *Advanced workshop*

- Goal: Create site-based expertise (Share site experience – develop solutions – application – create professional knowledge)
- Method: Assignment and discussion, partial lecture / Group discussion with experts in the practical research method
- Time: Total 30 hours. Can be offered three separate workshops
- Assessment: Evaluation of action research report, final case study.

Table 7: South Korean RPL-professional training - Advanced workshop

Topic	Content	Time
Opening	Program purpose and overview	1h
Identifying / Guiding Skill development	Understanding diverse types of adult learners Understanding and reconfiguring the assessment criteria Skill development for criteria-based interview Sharing portfolio support experiences: issues and discussion	10h
Analysis / Assessment Skill development	Portfolio analysis skill development Decision-making skill development Written and verbal communication skill development	10h
Planning / Management	RPL system operation RPL management issues	5h



Skill development	Diversity in RPL management in university	
Reviewing and Feedback	Practical knowledge sharing Collective problem solving	4h
Closing	Ceremony	1h

## Discussion

RPL-professionals support the learner by turning the outcomes of prior learning into socially recognisable forms that can be utilized in securing human resources in the business sector and HEI admissions by widening the non-traditional adult learner's access. From the individual perspective, it is a way to recognise upgraded competences through experiential learning. From the government perspective, the program nurtures professional manpower and contributes to establishing a new system through which lifelong education in HEIs can be stimulated.

To nurture the RPL-professional in South Korea, we suggest the following points: (1) Plans shall be established to expand and apply the RPL system by reorganising related government policies and systems; (2) Assessment criteria shall be constructed by categorising diverse prior learning experiences; and (3) Connecting the RPL-professional training program with related professional qualifications may result in synergy for effective operation of the training program.

First, it is required to revise the Article 23 of the Higher Education Act of South Korea that limits the credit validation of work experiences to two- or three-year technical colleges. The current act regulates the RPL application to the four-year university due to the fact that the adult learner may be thoughtlessly registered and the credit may be over issued to increase student numbers within universities. However, many universities in South Korea have to serve adult learners as the number of high school graduates is dramatically decreasing due to the low birth rate in South Korea. As the RPL system is very new to universities, the Korea National Open University (KNOU), which has been serving adult learners for more than 40 years, can test a pilot project. For example, in KNOU, a primary school teacher is a student of the early childhood education program and a Korean-Chinese who has Chinese majors in Chinese Literature. KNOU can start recognising prior learning right away but cannot do it under the current legal restriction. The government-funded Lifelong Learning-centered University Project is a good place to test the RPL. Participating colleges provide non-formal education programs to adult learners in the local community. Assessing the outcomes of individual learning in non-formal education programs and granting regular credits are ways to expand the RPL. Second, it is required to prepare assessment criteria based on various cases of learning experiences. Formal school education systematically assesses the learner with pre-determined criteria that should be achieved by the learner after education has provided the knowledge, skills and attitudes in the form of curriculum. However, university education is a bit different from this formal school education. The contents taught to university students are often dependent on individual professors' academic opinions and



competences. Recently, universities are required to create new knowledge by eliminating the border of academic departments and converging contents. The learning and teaching contents and their assessment criteria vary and it seems difficult for the university to prepare consistent assessment criteria for RPL practice. Therefore, it is necessary for each major department in the university to prepare recognition criteria categorising adult learners' learning experiences into related certification, job experience, education experience, and daily experience.

Third, the synergy may be achieved by linking the related qualification system with the RPL-professional training. Also, designating the operating organisation of the professional training program will upgrade the effectiveness in the RPL-professional training program. The National Institute can run the current training program for Lifelong Education, as it is responsible for the Academic Credit Bank System, Lifelong Learning Account System and Lifelong Learning-Centered University Project. It is required to utilize people with similar certifications to nurture excellent RPL-professionals on the basis of quality. It means that linking the RPL-professional training program with the existing qualification system such as the certificate of lifelong educator or vocational counselor will contribute to successful settlement of the RPL system in South Korea's HEIs.

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### **Web Resources**

<http://recognitionforlearning.ca>

<http://www.cael.org>

[https://www.learning.depaul.edu/eCS/CourseGroup.aspx?group\\_number=139andgroup\\_version=1](https://www.learning.depaul.edu/eCS/CourseGroup.aspx?group_number=139andgroup_version=1)



## Meeting points in the VPL process – a key challenge for VPL activities<sup>\*</sup>

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Ellen Enggaard and Kirsten Aagaard

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 third sector.

In this case study we focus on the meeting points between the individual, the HE educational institutions and the labour 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 do the HE institution and the work place meet. How can the correlations 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 third 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 six cases/individuals. Common to these 6 individuals are their strengths and resources.

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In Denmark there are many alternative career routes possible due to a relative well extended subsidy system to cultural activities, NGO work, folk enlightenment and so on. This 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 and so on. Our 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 six 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 focuses on IT workers who fear for their jobs due to the rapid development of qualifications in administrative jobs, IT and so on. 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 become obsolete very quickly. 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 from 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>19</sup> gives each individual (from 18 or 25 years depending on 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 assessment on the basis of the educational standards, admission requirements and competence objectives against which the candidate wishes

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19 <https://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=25349>



to be evaluated. Whilst the law puts the learning institutions at the center of the VPL process other stakeholders act as guidance institutions, for example the job centers, the trade unions and the third sector are also involved in guidance and counseling.

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 counseling, in a broader perspective, in the phase leading up to the assessment process ("the pre-phase"). These include 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 achieve these elements 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 in Denmark that 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 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's career route 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-term higher education in Social Education Work. He applies for a VPL at the educational institution, as he does not formally fulfill the admission requirements.

*Brian is 35 years old. In the Upper Secondary Education 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.*

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 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”* (Mezirow, 2005, in Illeris and Berri). The transformation process is a learning process that serves to reorientate Brian’s self-concept.

Brian realizes that he possesses academic and analytical competences and skills in communication and organization although he does not formally hold a qualification that proves it. Moreover 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 continue with his plan of getting a formal education in the field of social work, but he now realizes that he is able to enter 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 public sector.

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 term diploma study which 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’s degree.

### **Guidance and counseling in the VPL process**

If the counselor and/or assessor – the person dealing with the application – performs professionally, provides personalized career guidance and sets up a process with the applicant that is open to explore innovative opportunities and possibilities for career choices – the individual may learn in the process. Brian did learn in the process – he became clear about his possibilities and was able to make a career choice. His different work and life experiences could be transformed 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 in just a position to the formal requirements to gain access to a certain education, course or module. The counselor expects the applicant to be clear regarding 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 focuses 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 individuals will apply for 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 start of the process, 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, 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 that indicate 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 navigate through the formal knowledge and learning and to help the system accommodate the non-formal and informal knowledge and learning. To have the counselor as one of the assessors might validate 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, and account for formal, non-formal and informal learning.

### **An ethical dilemma**

The counselor that meets a VPL applicant is positioned between the applicant and the educational system. From this position she should give support to the applicant, and at the same time be a representative of the system, so 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 one's competences informal and non-formal learning assessed implies a possibility for people to gain formal acknowledgement and recognition from the system. The individual will get a piece of paper that tells the world that he or she is just as worthy, wise and valued as the one who passed an ordinary exam. The German social



philosopher Axel Honneth (2006) has 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" (ibid) 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.

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.

*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.*



Many of these IT workers have little or no formal education within the field of IT. Their job security is vulnerable due to the rapid developments in the IT sector. Some of the IT workers in this case hold positions as managers/leaders at different levels, which also places them, a vulnerable position due to rapid organisational changes and fusions in public sector. 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 specialised and extensive services, to optimise 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 interests**

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. This is also the case for some of them who prefer participation in education rather than exemptions. This issue 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 means for 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 Career development 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 Avoid double learning Access to HE	More students Motivated and goal oriented students

(Aagaard & Dahler (2010), translated and elaborated by writers)

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 want? Education? Change of career? Money? This is 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 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 tangible 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 it may be argued that the open and formative approach of the educational institution in this case was an inappropriate approach and to some extent misled the employees.

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 translating the formal objectives of the modules and studies for the work



place 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, where 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.

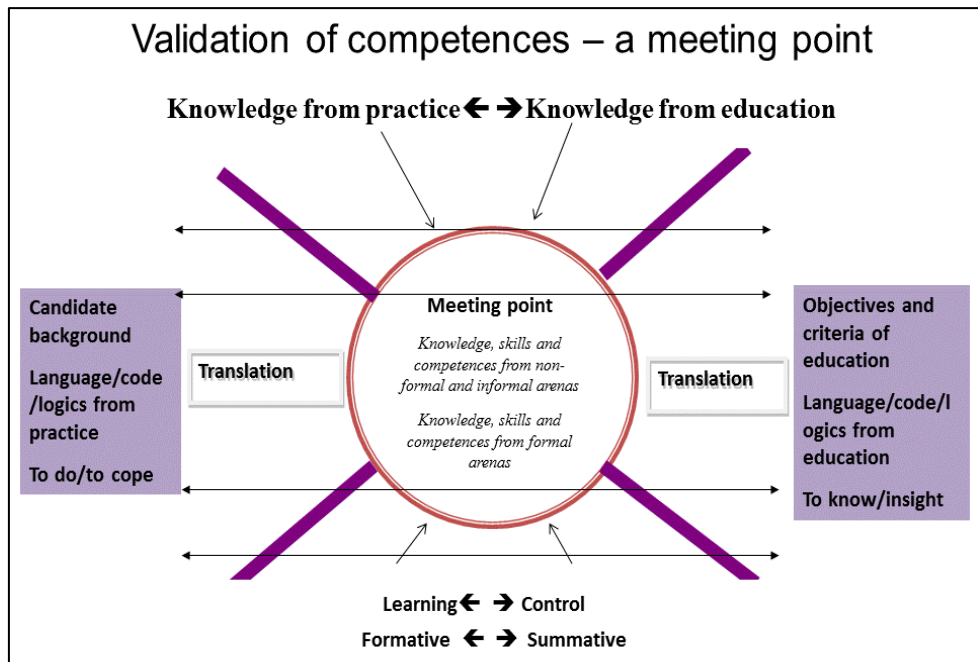
In the first case, where the individual meets with the educational institution we have brought attention to the importance of the role of the counselor. The counselor should be able to meet the individual with an open and formative approach to the process and in cooperation with the individual to investigate his life experience and competences. We saw that a professional career counselor was able to facilitate a learning process for the individual resulting in 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 not in fact 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 logic 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.





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 the 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 logic from the different arenas is called for in order to be able to arrive at consilience 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. This meeting point will be a place where a process of learning and a process of control (assessment) can connect and where formative and summative approaches link together.

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# Increasing employability of low qualified workers through the development of a skills recognition system in adult education

# 7

An IPA-funded project in Iceland, 2012-2015

Fjóra Maria Lárusdóttir

## Introduction

The Education and Training Service Centre (ETSC) in Iceland has worked on the EU funded project “Increasing employability of low qualified workers through the development of a skills recognition system in adult education” since September 2012. The aim of the project is to improve quality and efficiency of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning system for low-qualified workers in Iceland. The project focuses on increasing possibilities for the target group in regards to Validation of Prior Learning (VPL); it had done so through the development of a VPL system that covers the majority of studies offered at Upper Secondary School level, alongside developing VPL opportunities against job standards and employability skills. During one and a half years of the project’s lifetime an enhanced model has emerged for the ETSC to work with, increasing quality and efficiency. It is therefore unfortunate that EU has decided to terminate the project (and other IPA supported projects initiated in Iceland) due to political reasons. The results and effects of the project so far will be described in the following text.

## Project context

The Education and Training Service Centre (ETSC) was established by the Icelandic Confederation of Labour (ASÍ) and the Confederation of Icelandic Employers (SA) and since 2010 has also been owned by the Federation of State and Municipal Employees (BSRB), the Association of Local Authorities in Iceland and the Ministry of Finance. The Centre provides a collaborative forum for the founding parties focused on adult education and vocational training in cooperation with other educational bodies operating under the auspices of the member associations. As such, the ETSC is a centre for the development of non-formal adult education in Iceland and it targets those who have not completed the upper secondary level of education. This target group comprises approximately 33% of the Icelandic labour force. The objective is to enable individuals who have not graduated from the upper secondary level to obtain an education and improve their position in the labour market, which complies with the European agenda for adult learning and Europe 2020.



The ETSC operates in accordance with a service contract with the Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and administers the Education and Training fund for adult education. Main responsibilities include:

- Conducting needs analyses in cooperation with stakeholders
- Gathering and distributing information about the learning needs of the target group
- Developing educational opportunities for the target group in cooperation with Lifelong learning centres and the Icelandic Ministry of Education Science and Culture for accreditation of curricula
- Coordinating the development of Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) and training validation staff
- Coordinating the development of career counselling for the target group in cooperation with providers and specialists Increasing the quality of adult education
- Providing support for the development of teaching methods fit for the target group and training trainers
- Disseminating results to relevant stakeholders

The ETSC cooperates with 14 Lifelong Learning centres distributed around the country that deliver services to the target group. ETSC coordinates developments in the field, provides support to providers and oversees quality issues and results.

### **Status of the Recognition system for people with little formal education before the project**

VPL developments for the target group began in 2004. ETSC led the work in cooperation with stakeholders. The first pilots were conducted in 2004-2006 and a model for the VPL process was established and described in an information brochure intended for stakeholders. In 2007, funding through state budgets was initiated, based on a contract with the ETSC. Since then, projects in various sectors have been conducted where the focus has been on opening up VPL with a view to shortening study paths at Upper Secondary School level. Validation processes against competence criteria for specific jobs have also been developed. The Adult Education Act was passed in 2010, stating the right of the individual to VPL and career guidance. A regulation was presented in 2011, describing a defined process of validation and emphasising cooperation and quality assurance. By 2012, 32 VPL pathways had been opened for the target group.

### **Description of the project**

The project focuses on the continuing development of a VPL system in Iceland for people with little formal education and on building up a web-portal with information and guidance on competence criteria for jobs and relevant educational opportunities. During the project a collaborative forum of stakeholders was regularly consulted. A long-term skills' need audit of the Icelandic labour market has been produced as a basis for the choice of sectors chosen for validation projects and for the selection of jobs to be described in the web-portal.



### **Anticipated 3-year plan (2012-2015)**

A total of 52 validation projects were planned to place in various sectors by 2015; 40 against existing curricula at Upper Secondary School level, 6 against specific job criteria, and 6 based on criteria of basic skills. The system has been in development since 2004, covering 29 curricula and 3 specific jobs. By 2015, most curricula at Upper Secondary School level will be ready for the target group to go through a validation process, potentially shortening the time of studies considerably based on the competences validated. Validation staff will be trained for each project.

The project has also worked towards preparing a web-portal for job-profiles, qualification requirements, provision of education and training, interactive tools and web-guidance. In regard to this activity, the core of the database and main focus of the IPA project are the descriptions of 500 job-profiles, qualification requirements for the jobs and relevant provision of education and training to meet the requirements.

A marketing campaign was planned for the end of the project to disseminate information about the tools and opportunities developed in the project to end-users. The EU's early termination of the project means an end to it only half way through the project lifetime. The first half of the project focused on setting the stage through cooperation with stakeholders, developmental preparation of processes and material and initiating VPL in new sectors. In these ways, valuable learning took place which can be used for further, but considerably slower continuing developments.

### **Cooperation with stakeholders and a bidding process for the execution phase**

At the beginning of the project a forum of main stakeholders was formed to inform and consult on procedures. The forum has representatives from social partners, learning providers and ministries and it met regularly during the project. A great amount of time was allocated for meeting with stakeholders linked to job sectors, such as all Occupational Councils, Trade unions and professional associations, Upper Secondary Schools and Lifelong Learning Centres around the country. At the meetings, information about the concept and framework of VPL was shared and discussed and possibilities for suitable curricula and jobs analysed, including issues such as future demand, number of people in the sector and so on.

When initiating a VPL project in a new curricula and sector a Lifelong Learning Centre was contracted to coordinate the work of a steering group of stakeholders with a focus on...

- 1) Writing clear and measurable learning outcomes, developing tools and methods for the assessment process;
- 2) Deciding criteria for participation, discussing the screening process (how formal), setting criteria for assessors, defining possible hindrances in the process, suggesting recruitment strategies, deciding on how to register results, identifying learning paths for continuing learning after the VPL process;



- 3) Reviewing results after execution of the project and adjust methods and tools accordingly for the next group.

Once items 1 and 2 are finalised, the ETSC analyses the information and produces information for a bidding process in which Lifelong Learning Centres around the country are able to participate. The ETSC reviews bids and makes a contract with a Lifelong Learning Centre on the execution of VPL. LLL Centres provide VPL staff for the project, project managers, career counsellors, and assessors. Assessors are usually teachers from Upper Secondary Schools who represent the formal school system and can register units according to the results for each participant. The ETSC offers training for VPL staff and guidance on quality issues and procedures. After each project an evaluation form is submitted to the ETSC for review of quality developments. Statistics are gathered in a central databank. The bidding process has resulted in lower prices for each project at the same time as raising quality through adjusted procedures.

### **The Icelandic validation model for adults with little formal education**

The VPL process, practised through contracts with the ETSC, is identical to what is recommended in the European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning, with an extra focus and time allotted for career counselling and guidance during the whole process and follow-up. The process is described in regulation 1163/2011 linked to the Adult Education Act (2010) in Iceland.

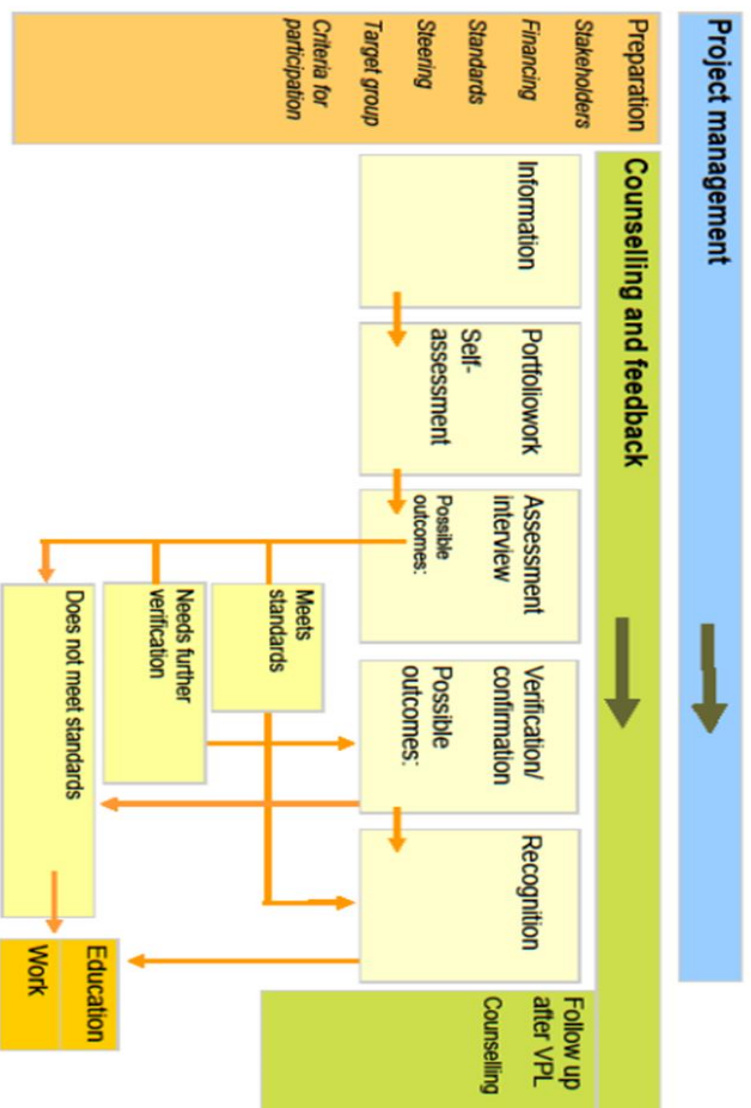
The process includes:

- Preparation for validation in new curricula in close cooperation with stakeholders (steering group);
- Information session provided for participants where they receive an overview presentation and documents clarifying the VPL process;
- Screening checklists developed by the steering group are used during the intake interview, mostly conducted by the career counsellors.
- Portfolios are developed by each participant (N=12-20) in a group session guided by career counsellors;
- Self-assessment form is filled out by each participant in a group session guided by assessor(s) within the chosen sector and career counsellors;
- Assessment takes place where the assessors use learning outcomes, checklists, portfolio, self-assessment, cases, interviewing, observation and other methods are used during for identifying and confirming competences for each participant;
- Each participant receives a certificate stating competences/courses validated;
- Guidance on further competence development by a career counsellor.

The next page presents an overview of the VPL model developed by the ETSC in Iceland.



## Validation—process overview





### *Validation staff:*

Project managers who coordinate the validation process for each group are staff from the Lifelong Learning Centres, most of whom have a diploma or MA in Career counselling.

Career counsellors provide guidance through the whole project. They conduct portfolio-work, provide support during assessment, guide the participants on next steps after validation and provide follow-up.

Assessors are mostly teachers from Upper Secondary Schools with expert knowledge in the field and teacher credentials. In some cases they can be supervisors from companies. They develop assessment material and assess participants individually through various methods.

All validation staff receive two days of training at the ETSC before working on a project.

### **Results**

The approach of involving a wider network of stakeholders has raised awareness and acknowledgment of VPL. More projects have been initiated in a shorter time than before, due to extra financing and a project plan, and the VPL system will have added 18 new pathways this spring which have been (or are in the process of being) piloted with stakeholders; an additional five are being prepared by steering groups. Notwithstanding the project's termination only half-way through, VPL opportunities for the target group have increased from 34 curricula and jobs up to 52 curricula and jobs, alongside five curricula and jobs ready for VPL piloting. New initiatives include VPL in general subjects (Icelandic, English, Danish and Mathematics) and in Employability skills at EQF levels 1-4.

The model of wide co-operation with stakeholders can be highly recommended with a focus on:

- a) Working on identifying and initiating new VPL projects with a steering group where all stakeholders of the sector at hand are involved and active in preparing methodology, criteria, tools and establishing validity of the results;
- b) Running a bidding process for the execution of projects among learning providers outside the formal system;
- c) Adjusting methods and tools based on results after execution. It has also been beneficial so far in the VPL developments in Iceland to have a central body coordinating VPL activities.

The project work has resulted in an enhanced method for initiating projects with stakeholders and tools for increasing quality and access. Since the ETSC coordinates VPL developments for the target group, the new developments will be integrated into the former system in co-operation with the board of the ETSC and the Education and Training Fund which funds VPL projects.



Validation of prior learning as a possible empowering instrument for North Korean refugees in South Korea

8

Dae Joong Kang

Introduction

The Korean Peninsula was divided into two halves, South and North, immediately following the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910-1945) and the two Koreas experienced a fierce Korean War (1950-1953). Since then, it has been almost impossible for people of South and North Korea to move to or travel to the other side. However, after North Korea’s ‘Arduous March (Mass-Starvation)’ during the mid-1990s, many North Korean people started to flee from their homeland due to the severe economic hardships. Many North Korean (NK) escapees eventually managed to escape to South Korea mainly by travelling through China and other Southeast Asian countries. Until 1998, there were only 947 North Korean known refugees living in South Korea (NK refugees hereafter), but the number dramatically increased as of 2013 to roughly 26,000 NK refugees living in South Korea.

Table 1. Number of NK refugees in South Korea

Year	~1998	2001	2003	2005	2007	2009	2011	2013	Total
Male	831	565	472	423	571	671	797	369	7,947
Female	116	479	810	959	1977	2258	1909	1145	18175
Total	947	1044	1282	1382	2548	2929	2706	1514	26122
% of Female	12%	46%	63%	69%	78%	77%	70%	76%	70%

Source: Ministry of Unification, South Korea (2013)

To support the growing number of NK refugees, the South Korean government enacted the *Protection and Settlement Support of Residents Escaping from North Korea* that became legislation in 1997. The South Korean government introduced special support policies for NK refugees, and established the *Hanawon*, an intake settlement support center for NK refugees, along with local *Hana* Centers. According to a recent survey conducted by the North Korean Refugees Foundation (2012a), the support areas most desired by NK refugees were medical (40%), financial (37.9%), employment (37.9%), and education (32.0%). However, education is one of the key programs that can best help NK



refugees to adjust in South Korea. For their benefit, NK refugees are mandated to take the 'standard curriculum' offered at the *Hanawon* so that they can most easily accommodate themselves to the South Korean way of life following an initial investigation conducted by the National Intelligence Service. *Hanawon* also provides various programs linked to employment such as 'care worker training course', 'basic electronic assembly', 'basics on quality assurance', 'sewing' and much more. Additionally, once NK refugees complete the basic social adjustment programs at Hanawon, three weeks of training is required at a local *Hana* center. Moreover, the South Korean government subsidises vocational training institutes to promote participation of NK refugees in training programs (Ministry of Unification, 2012: 201). Along with vocational training programs, the government offers financial aid and validation services of formal learning from North Korea to ensure NK refugees can access formal education in South Korea.

An emerging social issue in South Korea is the debate surrounding how to best empower NK refugees so they can be successfully integrated in South Korea; this sensitive dilemma is a sort of touchstone in preparing for the unification of South and North Korea in the future. In this chapter an idea is presented that states that validation of prior learning (VPL) can be a useful instrument for helping NK refugees' access to higher education, which can be a viable source of empowerment for their settlement in South Korea. VPL guides NK refugees to make an inventory of their own competences that can be socially recognised and linked to vocational qualifications and to further learning in South Korea, where higher education has a special meaning culturally and socially. In this chapter, I follow the three modes of VPL proposed by Duvekot (2014):

- Reflective-VPL: taking a whole learning biography of an individual as the focus for building up a portfolio and creating an action plan. Only after these are done, the individual makes a choice in action taking.
- Summative-VPL: building up a portfolio against a pre-set standard with a one-dimensional goal looking for access and exemption.
- Formative-VPL: Using a portfolio to a standard for deciding what/where/how to learn further or formulating a career-step with the portfolio as a starting point.

This chapter is divided into five sections. In the first and second sections, I will introduce the reader to a brief Korean social and historical context related to the meaning of higher education and the current status and policies for North Korean refugees' access to higher education. In the third section, I will review the current key VPL policy programs in terms of higher education in South Korea. The fourth section provides an illustrative description of the experiences of four individual NK refugee cases that focuses on how they were able to access higher education in South Korea. Finally, I will discuss how VPL can empower NK refugees for their successful settlement and integration in South Korea.



### **The Meaning of Access to Higher Education in South Korea**

During the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) in Korean history, those who wanted to be a government official had to pass an examination called Gwageo. The examination questions were selected from Confucian Great Classics. Seong-gyun-gwan, a higher education institute of the time, admitted only those who passed Gwageo. The ruling class of the Joseon dynasty mainly consisted of government officials who attended Seong-gyun-gwan. In other words, any hopes of becoming a member of the ruling class or maintaining its status - desperate and hopeful individuals - had no choice but to dedicate their lives to studying and learning the Confucian Great Classics for a chance of passing the Gwageo. Thus, success through education and examination became a kind of cultural tradition in Korea. Many people believe that this is the origin of the extraordinary education fever and expectations of education among Korean people. During the Japanese occupation era (1910-1945), this cultural tradition was further intensified as completing higher education was the only way to achieve a good social position, since the Japanese colonial government adopted education as means of governing colony. Non-formal education, such as night school and *Seodang* (village school), were not recognised as official academic achievements, while school diplomas were observed in every kind of professional work. In particular, Japanese imperialists transplanted a Japanese hierarchical higher education system, which was constituted by the Imperial University and subordinate professional colleges. Access to higher education was only allowed to a handful of Korean people who were obedient to colonial government (Kim and Woo, 2009). In short, during the Japanese occupation era, diplomas (especially higher education degrees) were overemphasised and the Korean people considered higher education as vital for social mobility.

After gaining independence from the Japanese occupation, access to secondary and higher education expanded explosively in South Korea. According to the statistics released by Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI) and National Statistical Office of Korea, rapid expansion of secondary and higher education was observed.

Table 2 shows percentages of school attendance and entrance for the last 35 years. As the table shows, post-compulsory education (high school) entrance rates are close to 100%. From 2005 till 2010, more than 80% of high school graduates entered higher education.



Table 2. Attendance and entrance rates of Secondary and Higher Education in South Korea (Unit: %)

	Middle School		High School		Higher Education
	Attendance rate	Upper level entrance rate	Attendance rate	Upper level Entrance rate	Attendance rate
1980	73.3	84.5	48.8	27.2	11.4
1985	82.0	90.7	64.2	36.4	22.9
1990	91.6	95.7	79.4	33.2	23.6
1995	93.5	98.5	82.9	51.4	36.0
2000	95.0	99.6	89.4	68.0	52.5
2005	94.6	99.7	91.0	82.1	65.2
2010	97.0	99.7	91.5	79.0	70.1
2011	96.7	99.7	91.9	72.5	71.0
2012	96.1	99.7	92.6	71.3	68.4
2013	96.2	99.7	93.6	70.7	68.7

Source: National Statistical Office of Korea

From 2011, a slight decrease is observed in entrance and attendance rates of higher education. In spite of this slight decrease, according to the OECD (2013), South Korea's high school and higher education completion rates are higher than the OECD average. Especially among younger adults (from age of 25 to 34), the high school completion rate (98%) and higher education completion rate (64%) were observed to be the highest among OECD member countries (Table 3):

Table 3. Completion rate of High School and Higher Education (2011)

Age		25-64	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64
High School	South Korea	81%	98%	96%	75%	45%
	OECD Average	75%	82%	78%	73%	64%
Higher Education	South Korea	40%	64%	49%	28%	13%
	OECD Average	32%	39%	34%	28%	24%

Source: OECD (2013)

According to the OECD (2013), the global economic crisis in the 2000s called attention to the importance of education for employment among OECD countries. Higher education was identified as directly related to employment possibilities and wage levels (OECD, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2013). South Korea is no exception. In regard to the adult



employment rate (age 25-64), it is shown that as education level grows higher, the employment rate also gets better in South Korea (see Table 4).

Table 4. Adult employment rate classified by education level  
(Unit: %)

Education Level		Kindergarten and Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Professional College	University and Graduate School
South Korea	Total	61	68	71	74	78
	Male	72	81	84	90	90
	Female	56	59	58	58	62
OECD Average*	Total	46	58	73	81	84
	Male	59	69	80	86	88
	Female	37	48	65	77	79

\* In OECD average, high school means only general high school, not vocational high school.  
Source: OECD (2013); Ministry of Education, South Korea (2013)

In South Korea, education levels are also closely linked to income levels. Table 5 illustrates income levels based on educational levels. If the average income level of adults with a high school diploma is adjusted to a standardised scale of 100, the income level of adults who attained up to middle school or under is 83.2, while that of professional college graduates is 108.3. The average income level of university graduates or higher is 154. In particular during the period 1980 to 1990, the average income of university school graduates was almost double that of high school graduates. Therefore, as illustrated, it seems quite natural to expect intense competition for higher education entrance. Due to an insecure labour market and a high youth unemployment rate, higher education has evolved into a form of necessity to secure social and economic stability in South Korea. Without a higher education degree, it becomes more difficult for individuals to prepare for the future in South Korea.

Table 5. Wage level change based on education level

	Wage index based on education level			
	Middle school graduate and under	High school graduate	Professional college graduate	University graduate and Graduate School
1980	124(68.8)	180(100.0)	254(146.3)	413(228.5)
1985	226(74.7)	303(100.0)	393(129.6)	686(226.5)
1990	407(87.7)	465(100.0)	542(116.7)	812(174.6)



1995	959(87.3)	1,100(100.0)	1,192(108.4)	1,715(155.9)
2000	1,261(86.3)	1,461(100.0)	1,508(103.2)	2,321(158.9)
2005	1,665(83.7)	1,989(100.0)	2,034(102.3)	3,140(157.8)
2006	1,765(83.2)	2,122(100.0)	2,125(100.2)	3,278(154.5)
2011	1,692(83.2)	2,034(100.0)	2,204(108.3)	3,132(154.0)

\* Unit: 1,000 Korean Won

\* Numbers inside the round brackets show relative level when putting high school graduate wage is adjusted to 100.

Source: Kim (2007: 201) and Ministry of Employment and Labour (2011)

### **Policies related to North Korean refugees' access to Higher Education Institutions**

According to the 2012 Survey on NK refugees, almost 9 out of 10 NK refugees completed secondary education, while only 14 out of 100 had attained higher education degrees (Table 6). Taking into account the importance of higher education in South Korea, Table 6 indicates a considerable percentage of NK refugees are in need of higher education.

Table 6. Education level of NK Refugees

Level of Education	Elementary School		Secondary School		Professional College		College and University	
	drop-out	graduate	drop-out	graduate	drop-out	graduate	drop-out	Graduate
Percentage	3.1	3.7	7	64.5	1.6	10	5.8	3.9

In regard to NK refugees' experience of formal education in South Korea, survey results focused on the highest level of education attained by NK refugees revealed 'never attended formal education' (71.7%), followed by 'university attendance' (7.3%), 'high school graduate' (2.3%), 'university graduate' (1.7%), 'professional college attendance' (1.7%), 'professional college graduate' (1.1%), and 'high school attendance' (1.0%'. Despite the fact only a minimal number of NK refugees had accessed formal education, the results show that higher education is the preferred level of education for those who wish to access formal education in South Korea. Specifically, for 25.6% of NK refugees in their 20s or under who had been attending or had graduated from higher education institutes in South Korea.

There are three policies that support NK refugees' access to higher education: validation of formal education from North Korea, financial aid, and transfer admission support (Ministry of Unification, 2012: 52-61). First, the policy of validating education experiences of NK refugees attained in NK is run by and validated by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Unification. When they fled to South Korea, many NK refugees did not bring with them any proof of identity or their educational achievements. Most arrived with either illegal passports or only the clothes on their backs. Currently, since most NK refugees possess no legitimate proof of identity or legal documentation confirming their educational experiences, validating their educational experiences is usually conducted through written statements and, if necessary, by testifying in front of



a committee. The local Office of Education oversees the validation process of those with elementary and secondary education experiences, while higher education is validated by both the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Unification together. Only once the statement is confirmed by the overseeing administrator(s), can a certificate be issued to the applicants. This certificate is the only official document that bears witness to the educational level attained by NK refugees in North Korea. Any NK refugee whose educational experiences are validated and who receives a high school diploma validation, can apply to universities in South Korea, and NK refugees who receive university degree validation have the chance to enter graduate school as well.

Secondly, NK refugees whose education level is validated as high school graduate or higher, enters, or transfers to the university or college within 5 years of the validation and his or her age is under 35, government financial aid is guaranteed. Entrance to a national or public university secures a full government financial aid package that includes entrance fee, tuition, and other school expenses. Entrance to a private university awards a government financial package that covers half of the expenses, and allows the university to request support for the other half of the expenses from the Ministry of Unification. For higher education institutions that are listed as lifelong education institutions<sup>20</sup>, the age restriction of 35 years is waived if attendance is secured within five years of their arrival in South Korea.

Lastly, colleges and universities provide separate entrance pathways for NK refugees to promote their accessibility. Generally, NK refugees can apply to universities through the Special Admission for Overseas Koreans and Foreigners (SAOKF), but may choose to forego government financial aid and apply through normal pathways or application process. Universities, with the exception of K-12 teacher training institutes and medical schools benefit from recruiting NK refugees because the numbers of NK refugees who are accepted into them are exempt from an entrance quota. On the other hand, NK refugees who have validated Bachelor's degrees are eligible to transfer to a higher education institution in South Korea as a junior student.

### **VPL and Higher Education in South Korea**

In South Korea, validation policies related to higher education are implemented under the Higher Education Act and Lifelong Education Act. Currently, there are three dimensions of validation in South Korea:

- a) Recognition of credit in university
- b) Recognition of prior learning policy programs administered by National Institute for Lifelong Education (NILE)
- c) Lifelong Learning-centred University Project as national agenda.

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<sup>20</sup> Industrial college, professional college, cyber university, distant education institute, lifelong education institute, and other accredited program operating institutes recognized by Lifelong Education Act



#### *a) Recognition of credits in university*

Credit recognition in university is stipulated in Article 23, Clause 1 of the Higher Education Act. According to this clause, credits are recognised in following six cases:

- (1) If a learner obtained credit from a different domestic and foreign school;
- (2) If a learner obtained credit from lifelong education institution of which the educational level or diploma is recognised as equivalent to a 2-year-college or university graduate by the 'Lifelong Education Act';
- (3) If a learner obtained credit equivalent to that of a university curriculum, from schools defined as a higher education institute by the 'Higher Education Act';
- (4) If a learner obtained credit through distance education while "on leave of absence for military service";
- (5) If a learner's credit is recognised by the Minister of Education according to the 'Act on Credit Recognition and Others';
- (6) If a learner's learning, researching, practical training, or work experience in another school, research institution, or industry is recognised.

While items (1) to (5) are in the form of credit transfer, item (6) involves a process of validation of the learner's particular experience. However, only technical and vocational colleges are allowed to implement item (6), whereas 4-year colleges and universities are not allowed to adopt it. This means that in South Korea, validation based on prior learning experience from various work and social lives outside of educational institutes is currently limited to technical and vocational colleges.

#### *b) VPL policy programs in NILE*

The National Institute for Lifelong Education (NILE) manages validating prior learning experiences through policy programs such as Bachelor's Degree Examination for Self-Education (BDES), Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS), and Lifelong Learning Accounts (LiLAs). BDES offers an autodidact learner a chance to acquire a bachelor's degree solely by examination. In order to obtain a degree through BDES, an autodidact has to go through four phases of examination that are validation examinations for liberal arts (phase 1), major introductory foundation (phase 2), major enrichment (phase 3), and comprehensive final examination (phase 4). The policy can be cross-utilised with ACBS. For instance, phase 1 of BDES is equivalent to 20 credits in ACBS, and for each of the other three phases, a phase is equivalent to 30 credits in ACBS.

ACBS is an alternative way of acquiring a college degree outside of traditional higher education institutes. It recognises the learners' various learning experiences from formal and non-formal education institutions as academic credits and the learner can obtain a bachelor's degree or an associate degree once the accumulated credits fulfil the required standard. The operation of ACBS is basically a validation of applying institutions and their educational programs, not the outcome of individual learner's prior learning experience itself. In order to participate in ACBS, an institution must pass two accreditation processes, 'operating condition evaluation' and 'program evaluation'. The learner can acquire academic credits through the following six routes: (1) Taking the ACBS-accredited



program, (2) Qualification can be recognized as equivalent to academic credit, (3) Taking courses from higher education institutes listed in the 'Higher Education Act', (4) Passing the Bachelor's Degree Examination for Self-education, (5) Part-time registration for university or 2-years-college open to the general public (not to enrolled student), and (6) Learning from Important Intangible Cultural Assets as their pupils.

LiLAs is a virtual individual account that allows NK refugees to register their learning experiences comprehensively. Accumulated records in the accounts are used for warranting learning experiences. NILE validates non-formal educational programs for LiLAs as long as programs are at least two weeks long and have more than total 15 hours of activities. The number of accredited programs has increased rapidly, from 747 in 2010 to 1,769 in 2012. Individual learners can register any kind of learning experiences alongside NILE-validated programs. While ACBS is linked to a university or 2-year college degree, LiLAs are linked to equivalency examinations to validate elementary and secondary education. As of September 2013, 1,126 programs have been accredited for the qualification examination program. If learners take those programs, they can be exempt from related examination subjects.

### *c) Lifelong Learning-centred University project*

The Lifelong Learning-centred University Project has been promoted by the South Korean Ministry of Education since 2008. The project aims to change universities into adult learner-friendly institutes. Traditionally, research and teaching are two dominant types of university function. Lifelong learning is the third type of university function in the 21st century. Many universities participating in the project adopted VPL as a way of attracting adult learners. For instance, in 2009, Seoyeong University decided to validate students' prior work and learning experience up to 20% of their graduation credits.

## **Cases**

In this section, four individual cases are described; they focus on NK refugees' experiences of accessing higher education after they came to South Korea. The case description aims to delineate points where and how VPL can be linked to help NK refugees' successful settlement in South Korea.

### *Yujeong*

Yujeong is a NK refugee who is in her early twenties and preparing to enter a university at an alternative school specialized for NK refugees. She had completed four years of elementary education and six years of secondary education before she fled from North Korea. However, this is not enough to study at college level in South Korea. When Yujeong was asked to look back on her learning experiences in North Korea, the first thing she remembered was the North Korean revolution history of Kim Il Sung and his son, Kim Jung Il. She understands that memory as being more important than language and mathematics, which are regarded as the most important school subjects in South Korea. While she had fully memorised those histories, she did not really care about speaking or writing in English because she never thought that she would ever go abroad



in her lifetime. However, after she came to South Korea, she was faced with the difficult realisation that English is both highly regarded and necessary. Mathematics was not as difficult to learn as English, but still, the high school curriculum was burdensome. Although she had finished her secondary education in North Korea, it was long ago and she found it difficult to remember what she had learned from school textbooks.

After coming to South Korea, Yujeong worked for three years in a convenience store as a sale clerk in order to pay money to brokers who had helped her family to come to South Korea. It is well known that many NK refugees cannot come to South Korea without the brokers' help once they arrive in China. Yujeong was able to start studying only after her parents made enough money to live. Yujeong was validated up to secondary education, and was therefore able to enter a university through the 'Special Admission for Overseas Koreans and Foreigners'. Yujeong feels thankful for the 'special admission' policy because it has given her a chance to enter university without having to compete with South Korean students. However, she is still worried about the fierce competition she will face with South Korean students once she attends university. She is told she can catch up to the other students if she does her best. Alongside these hopes and worries, Yujeong dreams of her forthcoming campus life in South Korea.

### *Minjin*

Minjin is in her late 50s and a doctoral student in social work. After her elementary and secondary education, Minjin went through various kinds of higher education in North Korea. She studied in a School of Education, a Nursing School, and in a communist leader training institution that provided very special education to a select group of people. She worked as an accountant in several jobs. However, after her husband, who was an elementary school teacher, died, she was requested to fill his vacancy by the Communist Party.

When she assumed her duty as a teacher in 1994, the period of arduous march (mass starvation in North Korea) started. Minjin remembers the small salaries that were paid to teachers over a period of about 10 years. She and other teachers in school had no choice but to work extra jobs to earn enough money to survive. She made clothes using a sewing machine and sold them in the market.

When she came to South Korea, Minjin thought that getting a job would not be so hard since she was highly educated and had teaching experience. In reality though, she found herself thrown into an unfamiliar situation. She was especially shocked when she found out that many South Koreans retire in their 50s. She started working in a clothes repair shop relying on her past experiences as a clothes maker in North Korea. However, the owner paid her less than the other employees because she was a NK refugee, so Minjin quit the job. It was at that time that she started to use the educational opportunities available for NK refugees. Minjin began her undergraduate studies again with an Cyber University (online University) in 2005, majoring in social work; the director of the university paid for her education expenses. She recalls how confused and difficult it was



for her during her first semester due to the challenges of academic terms and English names. Minjin overcame these barriers by dedicating her time to studies and repeatedly watching the online lectures. Also, she found out later on that the online university is free for NK refugees and she would receive the refunds for her earlier school expenses. She started graduate courses while she was a junior at the online university. Although she did not graduate from the online university, she entered graduate school after being validated of her North Korean higher education experience.

Currently, Minjin runs a small counseling center for NK refugees and families. She also offers a basic literacy education program for local women at the center. These are linked to with her formal experience in North Korea. Furthermore, she is writing her doctoral dissertation in social work. She thinks that her learning experiences from both North and South Korea have helped her life greatly in South Korea. Along with her experience in South Korea, she believes that the skills, abilities and experiences she gained in North Korea can be applied in South Korea as well. She is a spokeswoman who shares how to make use of higher education opportunities to NK refugees as higher education can help NK refugees to adjust in South Korea.

### *Eunju*

Eunju is in her early 50s and is working as a teacher in an alternative school. She came to South Korea in 2008. Eunju completed four years of elementary education, five years of secondary education<sup>21</sup> and studied in a college of education for five years in North Korea. After graduation, she became a teacher in North Korea and worked in a good school, where various government-funded projects were carried out. She explains that due to her busy schedule and work load in school she could not take care of her daughter well enough. Her daughter became ill, and she had to leave her job to take care of her daughter. She escaped from North Korea with her daughter because of its mass starvation.

When Eunju arrived in South Korea, she found out that she could neither work as a teacher in South Korea nor could she go to a university to get a teacher's certificate. As a result, Eunju attended a private institution to study nursing. Although there were public institutions she could have received financial aid through the policy for NK refugees, she chose to go to a private institution because public institutions did not allow her to work part-time. While Eunju was working as a nurse's aide in a postnatal care center, she got a chance to attend a training program for teachers from North Korea. It was offered by Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI) and the participants were required to help underachieving NK refugee students in secondary school. After finishing a training program, she started to teach in the alternative school for NK refugees. Later, she founded her own alternative school for NK refugee students. The validation of her North Korean degree in teacher education was very helpful when she opened her own

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<sup>21</sup> Currently secondary education in North Korea is six years, however at that time it was five.



alternative school since she had to have an educational background. She was the manager of the school at the time of her interview.

Although Eunju could continue her career as a teacher in South Korea, she feels bad because her experience as a teacher is not fully recognised. Eunju argues that many professional NK refugees are not able to continue their careers in South Korea. However, the issue remains that there is no way to validate their professional work experience.

### *Jihyeon*

Jihyeon is in her early 40s and is a dentist at a local dental clinic in South Korea. Both of her parents had a bachelor's degree, and her life in North Korea was different from other ordinary NK refugees. As she was from a middle and upper class family and showed outstanding academic achievement, she was able to attend a medical school. She also got a graduate degree in dentistry while she was in North Korea. In 2006, Jihyeon came to South Korea with her husband and son. She began to find out ways to study in a medical school during her *Hanawon* training period. However, the 35 age limitation for financial aid was a huge barrier to her. After a while, she met a NK refugee who was a medical doctor and he told her that it was possible to apply for a medical doctor qualification examination without a South Korean medical school education. But still, she did not know where or how to start preparing for the qualifying examination. Luckily, she was able to connect with a branch of her medical school alumni group in Seoul. This comprised a small number of alumni who had graduated from the same medical school in North Korea before the division of South and North Korea. With the help from the alumni, she was able to meet a professor in a South Korean medical school who introduced Jihyeon to his students. He also provided invaluable resources to her. For instance, she was able to go to the school library to find out textbooks and received secondhand books from graduating students. Moreover, she was able to audit final summary lectures for preparing the qualification examination. With this help, she was able to pass the examination within one year.

Although Jihyeon obtained a medical doctor qualification in South Korea, it was difficult for her to get a job in a dental clinic. She had no practical experience in South Korea. She had considered going to graduate school again, but no financial support was available for graduate students, even for NK refugees. Again, with help from the professor, Jihyeon had the opportunity to attend practical training in his medical school, where she was able to gain much experience. After the six-month practice, Jihyeon was finally able to get a job in a dental clinic. Having become an employed dentist, she regularly attends seminars related to orthodontics to continue her development of her skills.

### **Discussion**

Emerging issues can be seen from the four case descriptions in terms of VPL. Firstly, it is found that young NK refugees' prior learning outcomes must be validated in greater depth and more reflectively to help them to prepare properly for higher education in South Korea. The current validation process is just to check whether they graduated from



a secondary school in North Korea, and this does not consider their competences or prior work experiences at all. It should be noted that the focus of validation is not a proof of participation of formal learning, but the outcome of learning. Young NK refugees who have a government-issued high school graduation validation paper can access higher education easily by being supported with financial aid and a special admission process as overseas Koreans and foreigners. However, like Yujeong, many young NK refugees are concerned about their campus life and whether they will be able to socialise with South Korean students. Yujeong's anxiety is not purely imagined. The retention rate of NK refugee students is relatively lower than that of South Korean born students in many universities. In some universities, one out of four NK refugee students have dropped out (Office of National Assemblyman Hong Jungwook, 2010). NK refugee students tend to feel isolated in campus (Cho, 2013; Noh, 2009) and have problems adapting to university life due to not only social and economic reasons but also academic underachievement according to some research (Ko, 2011, Shin & Park, 2009). An online training program for NK refugee freshmen, developed by Korea National Open University in 2010, is the only one that covers general competences needed in the university learning in its fifteen two-hour sessions. Although the program could act as an introduction to college life in general, it falls short of developing key academic skills that many of NK refugee students need (Kim et. al., 2010) to succeed at the university level. Reflective VPL is a right solution to this problem. Through reflective VPL, NK refugee students can identify what kinds of supplementary learning they need for taking university classes. It is not enough simply to validate NK refugees' formal learning by issuing a paper of validation. Instead, what they actually need is to be able to understand their status in terms of their preparedness to function and adjust to the competition, academic rigour and social challenges of studying in South Korean universities.

Secondly, incorporating VPL into the Hanawon intake period or the early stages of NK refugees' settlement in South Korea will enhance the effectiveness of educational support that follows. Even though Korean government works hard to provide vocational education and training to NK refugees to enhance their employability, it is evaluated as relatively unsuccessful according to research (Choi and Lee, 2009; Noh, 2012; Park and Kim, 2008). I would argue that absence of reflective and formative VPL strategies is a reason for this failure. As described in the cases of Minjin and Jihyeon, many NK refugees are not sufficiently familiar with the educational opportunities available to them, so they do not know that they could rely on other NK refugees to get relevant, helpful information. Although a kind of summative VPL has been carried out by the Korean National Intelligence Services to recognize their academic achievement, reflective and formative VPL are, by and large, absent. Matching NK refugees' educational need with proper educational programs is a key to successful settlement. Minjin would not have needed to spend the time and energy to register at the online university had she undergone reflective and formative VPL. Correspondingly, she might not have had to enter the online university as a freshman because she could have transferred to a different university as a junior with her higher education validation. Similarly, Jihyeon



might not have had to struggle to acquire the information needed for the medical doctor qualification examination had there been a systematic VPL process in place.

Finally, more VPL-related educational programs are needed for professional NK refugees. Like Eunju and Jihyeon, some NK refugees wish to make use of their prior professional work experience. However, considering cultural and technical differences between North and South Korea, it would be inappropriate to validate professional NK refugees' qualification without any supplemental education. Jihyeon had to work out on her own everything that was needed for the medical doctor qualification and practical training, which she was able to accomplish with the help of alumni and a professor she met opportunistically. It is also extremely difficult for NK refugee professionals to identify what is required to get the proper qualifications in South Korea. For instance, when Jihyeon first arrived in South Korea, she had no idea how or where to start her medical doctor qualification examination.

### **Concluding remarks**

Recently, a few training programs have been founded for professional NK refugees such as the 'NK teacher academy' and 'medical doctor profession conversion program.' Although positions to teach at public schools are not open for NK refugees, the 'NK teacher academy' provides opportunities for teachers from North Korea to make use of their former experiences within the academy (Kang, Han and Lee, 2014). Also, a 'medical doctor profession conversion program' supports doctors from North Korea to prepare for their qualifying examination. More possible professional supplement training programs can be identified once reflective and formative VPL processes for all NK refugees are in place. Current VPL-related policy programs such as ACBS, LiLAs and Lifelong Learning-Centered University might be used effectively to support NK refugees.

VPL aims to uncover real human competences by documenting and analysing personal learning outcomes. Within a specific socio-economic context, those who know their competences can manage their learning lives more effectively. VPL linked with education and qualification systems can offer individual development strategies to socio-economically disadvantaged people. NK refugees in South Korea are a unique group of people who naturally require VPL since they do not have any paper evidence of their life and learning experience at the time of arrival in South Korea. Multi-dimensional VPL including reflective, summative and formative VPL has a potential to empower NK refugees once it is linked to current key support policies that support access to higher education. If there were a unit or institution in charge of VPL for all NK refugees, it could be a vital hub for their settlement process.

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# VPL for more inclusive higher education in Honduras

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## Content analysis based on literature review on the Validation of Prior Learning (VPL)

Céleo Emilio Arias

*'The fundamental purpose of scientific discourse is not the mere presentation of information and thought, but rather its actual communication. It does not matter how pleased an author might be to have converted all the right data into sentences and paragraphs; it matters only whether a large majority of the reading audience accurately perceives what the author had in mind.'*

Gopen and Swan, 1990

This chapter is a content analysis based on the validation of prior learning in order that it can be integrated into the new educational model of *Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Honduras-Unah*. Securing a robust knowledge base requires assessments of what has been achieved so far within a research field, so it becomes crucial to review the literature critically. When a field of study is in a process of relative rise, as could be the case of Valuation of Prior Learning (VPL), it is possible that this process has not been as strict as other empirical research. Greater consistency is then required in the quality measures in aspects of validity and reliability of arguments and conclusions, as well as greater clarity and transparency in how to perform a process. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a critical review of literature on VPL. The literature review takes the form of a qualitative synthesis for which content analysis was applied to a sample of documents obtained from searches on three types of information: 1) official websites of key institutions, 2) databases and libraries linked to scientific research, and 3) externally peer reviewed key journals, linked thematically and providing international comparison across four sub-fields. Following a descriptive assessment identifying the body of literature, an analysis based on content analysis categories was derived deductively.

Overall, a sample of 31 documents was selected, then categorised and evaluated according to the four sub-fields: 1) Type of document, 2) Method of data gathering, 3) Method of data analysis and 4) Quality measures. The use of content analysis methodology in critical review of literature on the topic of "Validation of Prior Learning"



provides new information for the field and is proposed as good practice as it promotes greater transparency among the scientific community in this field of study.

### **Background**

Based on the indicators of low access, low coverage and high exclusion of the Honduran Higher Education system, the policy of knowledge management with quality, relevance and equity for greater access to public Higher Education was created (Calderón & Arias, 2008; Arias, 2009). By providing an international comparative perspective on the validation of prior learning this research project is intended to make a contribution to this policy.

### **Literature review as part of the research process**

The different steps carried out during the whole cycle of the project include:

1. Formulate and clarify the research topic
2. Critical review of the literature
3. Understand the philosophy and approach
4. Develop the final design of the research
5. Negotiate access and address ethical issues
6. Develop collection plan and collect data
7. Analyze data
8. Write the project report and finally prepare the presentation.

These steps are proposed by Saunders et al (2009), Tranfield et al. (2003), Fink (2005), and Adolphus (2009) (cited by Gold, (2011).

### **Methodology of Literature Review**

To achieve the second stage – the critical review of the literature - the author used the qualitative method of content analysis, specifically the process model proposed by Marying (2008), cited by Seuring and Gold (2011). This method is justified because the "Validation of Prior Learning" research field is emerging too.

It is important to note that the research project requires constant feedback from review of literature, but it is particularly vital in the early stages of formulating and clarifying the research topic as well as in the final stages of re-conceptualizing the findings.

The method proposed by Marying (2003) cited by Seuring and Gold (2011) comprises the following steps:

#### *A) Material collection*

The material to be collected is defined and delimited. Should include taking a look at the material has emerged as further defining the unit of analysis.

#### *B) Descriptive analysis*

Formal aspects of materials are evaluated, e.g. the number of publications per year. This description constitutes the background against which the theoretical analysis is performed.



### *C) Category selection*

Structural dimensions and related analytical categories are selected, to be applied in the review of the literature to structure the field. Structural dimensions are the main topics of analysis, covering various categories of analysis, for example, one year in a specific time period.

### *D) Material evaluation*

The material is analysed and ranked according to the structural dimensions and categories constructed. This should allow the identification of relevant issues and the interpretation of results.

## **Application and procedures of content analysis**

Following a systematic literature review of the four steps, the content analysis method was applied to the body of literature on 'Validation of Prior Learning acquired by previous experience', which includes the recognition of informal competencies.

### *A) Material collection*

As mentioned earlier, the sample included literature obtained from three sources: the first source comprised the official websites of key organizations, institutions, identifying relevant documents from institutions and organisations that have influenced the emergence of the subject, such as the European Union (EU), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). This covered the period of 60 years from 1960 to 2012. The second source included databases and library services related to scientific research that have contributed to the emergence of the theme. Papers spanning 22 years from 1990 to 2012 were considered. The third source contained databases and library services related to relevant key scientific peer reviewed journals providing international comparative perspectives over a 20 year period from 1990-2012. According to Seuring (2011) articles from peer reviewed scientific journals represent the major mode of communication between researchers. However, the author considers that while they would be taken as one of the key sources for analysis, they are not necessarily the only source. The rationale for focusing on these three sources is the value they bring to achieving one of the purposes of research project: helping to build bridges of communication and analysis among the various actors involved in the issue. Had the only source of information been peer reviewed scientific journals, this may have excluded other actors with an important role in the emergence of the field of study as well as influence on the debate and its agenda.

To compile the first source documents, information databases, networking websites, programs and projects related to major institutions and to the emergence of the research topic were considered; these included UNESCO (UIL, UNEVOC), OECD, NALL, ILO, EU (CEDEFOP), NQF's. A search was conducted at the general level of the websites, as well as internal search engines, based on the following key words 'Recognition',



'Accreditation' and 'Prior Lifelong Learning' found in titles, key words and abstracts of papers.

The second source of information, was conducted a literature search, based on the following key words 'Recognition', 'Accreditation' and 'Prior Lifelong Learning', found in titles, keywords and summaries of documents. Searches by keywords were conducted in the following databases and library services: Google Scholar, ProQuest, Academic OneFile, Academic Search, African Urban and Regional Science Index, Bibliography of Asian Studies, British Education Index, Current Abstracts, Educational Research Abstracts Online (ERA), Educational Technology Abstracts, ERIC System Database, International Bibliography of Book Reviews (IBR), International Bibliography of Periodical Literature (IBZ), International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS), JSTOR, Multicultural Education Abstracts, Research into Higher Education Abstracts, SCImago, Sociology of Education Abstracts.

To compile the third source of information (articles), a literature search similar to the second source was conducted. It was based on the following key words 'Recognition', 'Accreditation' and 'Prior Lifelong Learning', and focused on finding titles, keywords and abstracts of articles. Searches by keywords were performed within the following databases and library services: Elsevier ([www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)), Emerald ([www.emeraldinsight.com](http://www.emeraldinsight.com)), Springer ([www.springerlink.com](http://www.springerlink.com)), Wiley ([www.wiley.com](http://www.wiley.com)), Ebsco ([www.ebsco.com](http://www.ebsco.com)), Scopus ([www.scopus.com](http://www.scopus.com)), MetaPress ([www.metapress.com](http://www.metapress.com)), Subito ([www.subito-doc.de](http://www.subito-doc.de)).

3,428 documents were identified from the three sources of data collection, which became the input for the next step in the content analysis.

### *B) Descriptive analysis*

From the 3428 papers identified, it was possible to identify a distribution of the documents over the years (see figure 1 and 2). This reveals increased production of documents after 1990, which is consistent with the emergence of the VPL issue internationally, and coincides with studies and analysis of authors like Harris (2006, 2011) and Stenlund (2011). This finding supports the view that there is value in considering, for theoretical analysis, scientific articles and case studies distributed between 1990 and 2012.

### *C) Category selection*

In order to facilitate the initial organisation, a deductive approach was adopted, which was structured according to the following sub-fields that emerged from the literature review:

- Sub-field 1: General Review in RPL-APEL
- Sub-field 2: Empirical Research in RPL-APEL
- Sub-field 3: Methodologies in RPL-APEL
- Sub-field 4: Policies in RPL-APEL



- Sub-field 5: Qualifications Framework and Accreditation Systems in RPL-APEL
- Sub-field 6: specific cases in RPL-APEL
  - Sub-field 6.1: Vocational Technical Education in RPL-APEL
  - Sub-field 6.2: Higher education in RPL-APEL

Figure 1: Documents from three data sources Total

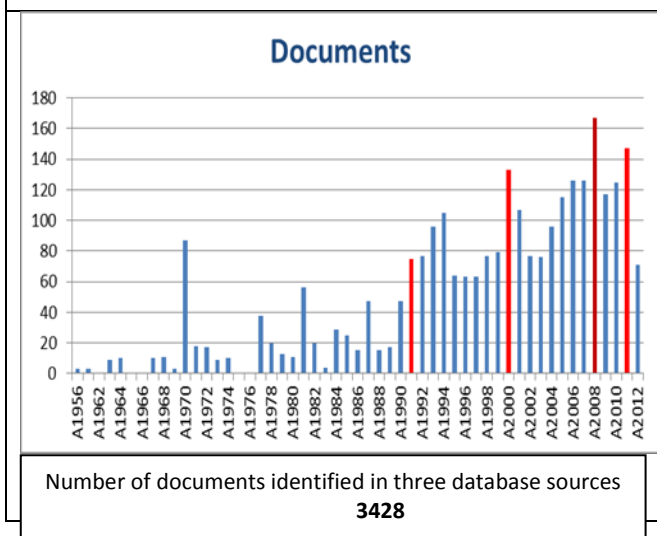
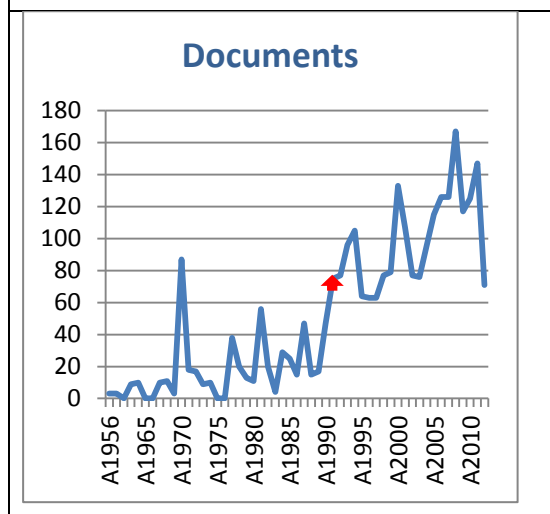


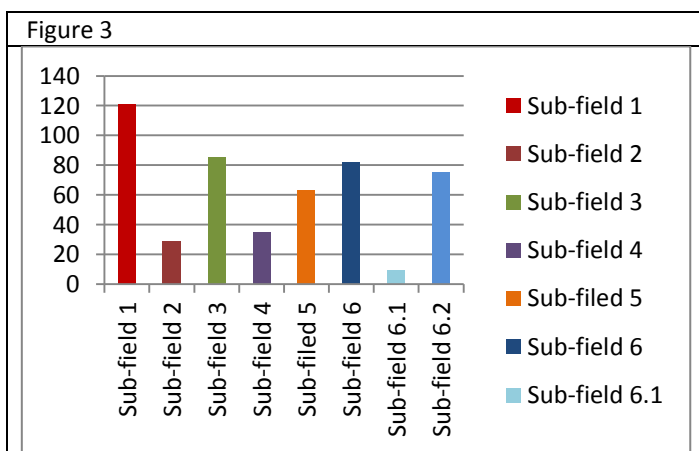
Figure 2: Documents from three data sources





For each sub-field the criterion for inclusion in the sample document was that at least two reviews within that sub-field had been published during the time period considered for research (1990-2012). From the 3,428 papers 499 documents were selected and classified. Details of sub-field distribution are available in Table 1 and Figure 3.

Table1	
Documents linked to each Sub-field	Quantity
Sub-field 1: General Review in RPL-APEL	121
Sub-field 2: Empirical Research in RPL-APEL	29
Sub-field 3: Methodologies in RPL-APEL	85
Sub-field 4: Policies in RPL-APEL	35
Sub-field 5: Qualifications Framework and Accreditation Systems in RPL-APEL	63
Sub-field 6: Specific cases in RPL-APEL	82
Sub-field 6.1: Vocational Technical Education in RPL-APEL	9
Sub-field 6.2: Higher education in RPL-APEL	75
<b>Total</b>	<b>499</b>



Following this process, an inductive procedure was introduced to classify the 499 documents further, according to three criteria:

- Greater relevance to the research topic,
- Direct link to the purposes of the doctoral research project,
- International perspectives on the field 'Informal recognition of competencies acquired in learning and previous experience.

Using this rubric, 31 key documents were identified for analysis.



#### *D) Material evaluation*

From these 31 papers, adjustment and integration of sub-fields (Table 2) were undertaken in order to facilitate analysis. Considering that the 'content analysis methodology' is adjusted according to the relevance of the analysis categories arise, this was an iterative construction process (Seuring and Gold, 2011) which combined deductive and inductive approaches. The deductive approach revealed categories before analysis and the inductive approach allowed categories to be derived from the material to be considered for the steps that followed.

<b>Table 2 : Sub-fields adjustment</b>
Sub-field 1: General Review RPL-APEL
Sub-field 2: Policies and Qualifications Framework in RPL-APEL
Sub-area 3: The RPL-APEL in Higher Education
Sub-field 4: Methodologies RPL-APEL

After completing the above three steps, the author applied a similar approach to that adopted by Seuring and Gold (2011) (see Table 3).



Table 3: Analytical categories and their definitions

Categories	Definition
1. Type of document	"Describe the type of document used to make the literature review"
1.1 Aim of research	"States of the overall topic / objectives of the literature review"
2. Method of data gathering	"Reported tools / procedure for identifying, delimitating, and gathering the relevant literature sample"
2.1 Number of documents checked	"Number of document contained in the literature sample"
2.2 Name of Journals cited	"Name of papers included in the body of literature"
2.3 Period covered	"Time period covered by the literature sample"
3. Method of data analysis	"Reported tools / procedure for analyzing the literature sample"
3.1 Type of data analysis	"Qualitative and / or quantitative analysis"
3.2 Descriptive analysis	"Descriptive specification of the literature simple (e.g., journals, number of publication per year)"
3.3 Analytical categories for analyzing the contents	"Main structuring (deductively or inductively derived) categories / arguments applied for analyzing and/or synthesizing the body of literature"
4. Quality measures	"Reported quality measures in terms of replicability, reliability, and validity".
Adapted from Gold, S. (2011)	

## Findings

In Table 4 the 31 papers selected for analysis linked to the doctoral research topic are presented in each of the sub-fields, alongside their authors and the main theme or objective. Table 5 assesses the method of material collection and indicates the number of documents reviewed, whether the name describes cited scientific journals as well as the time period covered. Table 6 presents the method of analysing data (type of data analysis, descriptive analysis, and analytic categories for content analysis and quality measures).



**Table 4: Distribution over sub-fields and main topics of documents under review**

Author	1 . Type of document	1.1 Aim of research
<b>Sub-field 1: General Review RPL-APEL</b>		
Harris, Judy (2000)	Book	Is a useful conceptual and implementation guide for academics, planners, policy-makers and practitioners who deal with the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).
Andersson, Per & Harris, Judy (2006)	Book	The aim is re-theorising the recognition of prior learning, challenges the orthodoxy of experiential learning and particular readings of knowledge, pedagogy, learning, identity and power.
Harris, Judy (2006)	Book-chapter	Is a perspective on knowledge and curricula in the theory and practice of recognition of prior learning
Cameron, Roslyn (2006)	Book-chapter	"Focus in Australia research, in which it is claimed that there is a gap between the promise and rhetoric of RPL practices and the reality of their contribution to greater educational and social inclusion"
Michelson, Helena (2006)	Book-chapter	"revisit the epistemological foundation within which RPL is typically practised, ...pay specific attention to the portfolio-assisted evaluation of university-equivalent knowledge"
Cardeiro, Roberto (2011)	Final report	Gives an account of the research efforts deployed at evaluation of the New Opportunities Initiative (NOI). Accreditation of prior learning as a lever for lifelong learning: Lesson learnt from in Portugal (empirical evidence).
Harris, Judy, Breier, Mignonne & Wihak, Christine (2011)	Book	"Provides a comprehensive account of current research in the UK, Canada, Sweden, Australia, South Africa, the USA and other EU and OECD countries. this collection is a stock-take of the current state of RPL research around the world"
Anderson, Per & Fejes, Andrea (2011)	Book-chapter	"focus on validation of RPL in Sweden and on research undertaken since 2000. Six main themes or areas have emerged: historical studies ;recognition of vocational competence; immigration and gender, theories of assessment; governance; and comparative studies.
Breier, Mignonne (2011)	Book-chapter	"Includes research on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in South Africa, according to broad purposes: 1) to develop policy; 2) to conceptualize RPL and guide practice; 3) to monitor and quantify implementation".
<b>Sub-field 2: Policies and Qualifications Framework in RPL-APEL</b>		
Guo, Shibao & Andersson, Per (2006)	Book-chapter	"...deploys Foucault's notions of power-knowledge and a critical 'politics of difference' to focus on the transfer of credentials and prior work experience of immigrant professionals in Canada and Sweden"
Peters, Helen (2006)	Book-chapter	"Explore why RPL practices have not succeeded in challenging academic 'hegemony' or in empowering candidates"
Cardeiro, Roberto (2011)	Book-chapter	"...A paradigmatic changes in the Portuguese public policy landscape." "...an innovative approach to motivate low-skilled adults to embark in a system of informal and non-formal skills recognition, accreditation and certification, with complements of formal learning"
Harry, Judy (2011)	Book-chapter	"...is an overview of the policy focus on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL) research in the European Union"
Mendonça, Maria & Carneiro, Maria (2011)	Book-chapter	"...attempts to disclose, firstly, how a close look at adult education public policies reveals features of the past that remain embedded in the present characteristics of the New Opportunities initiative (NOI). And secondly, which distinctive elements can be found in the New Opportunities initiative that posit in a uniquely and original manner in the adult education landscape".
Whittaker, Ruth (2011)	Book-chapter	"Scotland: Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) research within a national credit and qualifications framework in Scotland"
Wheelahan, Leesa (2006)	Book-chapter	"explores the relationship between teaching and learning and policy...review the "notion" of vocation as a relational concept...explore the concept of 'graduateness'..."
<b>Sub-field 3: RPL-APEL in Higher Education</b>		
Pokorny, Helen (2006)	Book-chapter	"...explore how it is that these barriers to APEL have been successfully maintained given the promotion of lifelong learning and widening participation policy agenda and the endeavours of APEL advocates over the years..."
Sandberg, Fredrik; Andersson, Per	Journal Article	RPL for accreditation in higher education – As a process of mutual understanding or merely lifeworld colonisation?
Stenlund, T. (2011)	Doctoral Thesis	As valid as it can be? Assessment of prior learning in higher education: A review from a validity perspective.
Cameron, Roslyn (2011)	Book-Chapter	"...explores aspects of Recognition of Prior Learning practice that relate directly to the inability of RPL to act as a mechanism for social inclusion for disadvantaged learners..."
Pokorny, Helen (2011)	Book-chapter	"Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) research in higher education in England"
Travers, Nan (2011)	Book-chapter	"...the way in which Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) policies and processes are established within educational institutions in the United States of America..."
Wihak, Christine & Wong, Angelina (2011)	Book-chapter	"...explored the use of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) in the context of Canadian university-based Adult Education programmes."
Wong, Angelina (2011)	Book-chapter	"Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) and the teaching-research nexus in universities"
<b>Sub-field 4: Methodologies in RPL-APEL</b>		
Andersson, Per (2006)	Book-chapter	"Different faces and functions of RPL: an assessment perspective"
Breier, Mignonne (2006)	Book-chapter	A disciplinary-specific approach to the recognition of prior informal experience in adult pedagogy: 'rpl' as opposed to 'RPL'
Shalem, Yael & Steinberg, Carola (2006)	Book-chapter	"Portfolio-based assessment of prior learning: a cat and mouse chase after invisible criteria", in P. Anderson and J. Harris (eds) <i>Re-theorising the Recognition of Prior Learning</i> . Leicester, England: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE).....Pag 99 details
Osman, Ruksana (2006)	Book-chapter	"RPL: an emerging and contested practice in South Africa"
Bélisle, Rachel (2011)		"provides an overview of scholarly research in the Recognition of Prior Learning undertaken since 2002 in Quebec, Canada..."
Werking, Patrick & Wihak, Christine (2011)		"a brief overview and discussion of the work of the OECD in relation to the Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning (RNFIL)..."
Van Kleef, Joy (2011)		"...explores research on PLAR outside Québec over the past 16 years (1995-2010 inclusive)..."
Table adapted from Gold, S. (2011)		



Table 5: Data collection methods of documents under review				
Document revised	2. Method of data gathering	2.1 Number of documents revised	2.2 Name of Journals cited	2.3 Period covered
Sub-field 1: General Review RPL-APEL				
Harris, Judy (2000)	CRP, LRJ	NM	N	NM
Andersson, Per & Harris, Judy (2006)	CRP, IAC, LRJ	NM	N	NM
Harris, Judy (2006)	CRP, IAC, NFM, LRJ	NM	N	NM
Cameron, Roslyn (2006)	CRP, IAC, LRJ	NM	N	NM
Michelson, Helena (2006)	NFM, CRP, IAC, LRJ	NM	N	NM
Cardeiro, Roberto (2011)	CRP, IAC, CSA	NM	N	NM
Harris, Judy, Breier, Mignonne & Wihak, Christine (2011)	CRP, IAC	NM	N	NM
Anderson, Per & Fejes, Andrea (2011)	NFM, CRP, IAC, LRJ	NM	N	2000-2010
Breier, Mignnone (2011)	NFM, CRP, IAC	NM	N	NM
Sub-field 2: Policies and Qualifications Framework in RPL-APEL				
Guo, Shibao & Andersson, Per (2006)	NFM, LRJ, CRP	NM	N	NM
Peters, Helen (2006)	CRP, IAC, LRJ	NM	N	NM
Cardeiro, Roberto (2011)	CRP, IAC, LRJ	NM	N	NM
Harry, Judy (2011)	CRP, IAC, LRJ (key Journals), KWS	49 publications: 11 scientific articles (from 8 journals )	Y	2000-2010
Mendonça, Maria & Carneiro, Maria (2011)	NFM, VIM, IAC, LRJ	NM	N	NM
Whittaker, Ruth (2011)	CRP, LRJ	NM	N	NM
Wheelahlan, Leesa (2006)	CRP, IAC, LRJ	NM	N	NM
Sub-field 3: RPL-APEL in Higher Education				
Pokorny, Helen (2006)	CRP, IAC, LRJ	NM	N	NM
Sandberg, Fredrik; Andersson, Per (2011)	CRP, LRJ	NM	N	NM
Stenlund, T. (2011)	KWS	NM	N	1990 to 2007.
Cameron, Roslyn (2011)	CRP, IAC	86 publications: 14 scientific articles (from 10 journals)	N	1990-2010
Pokorny, Helen (2011)	CRP, IAC, LRJ	NM	N	NM
Travers, Nan (2011)	CRP, IAC, LRJ	81 publications: 12 scientific articles (from 5 journals)	Y	1974-2010
Wihak, Christine & Wong, Angelina (2011)	KWS, CRP, IAC, LRJ	NM	N	NM
Wong, Angelina (2011)	CRP, IAC, LRJ	NM	N	NM
Sub-field 4: Methodologies in RPL-APEL				
Andersson, Per (2006)	CRP, IAC, LRJ	NM	N	NM
Breier, Mignonne (2006)	NFM, CRP, IAC, LRJ	NM	N	NM
Shalem, Yael & Steinberg, Carola (2006)	CSA, IAC, CRP , LRJ	NM	N	NM
Osman, Ruksana (2006)	IAC, LRJ	NM	N	NM
Bélisle, Rachel (2011)	KWS, LRJ, CRP,	NM	Y	2002-2010
Van Kleef, Joy (2011)	NFM, CRP, IAC, LRJ	78 publications: 8 scientific	Y	1995-2010
Werking, Patrick & Wihak, Christine (2011)	KWS, NFM, CRP, LRJ	NM	N	NM
Legend: General abbreviations NM- not mentioned Y: yes N: no				
2. Method of data gathering				
NFM: no formal material collection		IAC: information request		
VIM: only vague information about material selection		CSA: complete sample		
KWS: key word research in databases and library services		2.1 Number of documents revised		
LRJ: research limited to certain journals		2.2 Name of Journals cited		
CRP: cross-referencing for further relevant publications		2.3 Period covered		
Table adapted from Gold, S. (2011)				



Table 6 : Data analysis methods and quality measures of documents under review					
Document revised	3. Method of data analysis	3.1 Type of data analysis	3.2 Descriptive analysis	3.3 Analytical categories for analyzing the contents	4. Quality measures
Sub-field 1: General Review RPL-APEL					
Harris, Judy (2000)	IAC	QAL	DCS,DCA	Y	OTR
Andersson, Per & Harris, Judy (2006)	IAC	QAL	DCA	Y	OTR, VAL, REL
Harris, Judy (2006)	IAC	QAL	DCA	Y	OTR, VAL, REL
Cameron, Roslyn (2006)	IAC	QAL	NM	Y	NM
Michelson, Helena (2006)	IAC	QAL	NM	Y	NM
Cardeiro, Roberto (2011)	IAC	QAL, QAN	DCS	Y	NM
Harris, Judy, Breier, Mignonne & Wihak, Christine (2011)	IAC	QAL	DTP, DCA, DCS, DRT	Y	OTR
Anderson, Per & Fejes, Andrea (2011)	IAC	QAL, QAN	DTP, DVD, DRT	Y	OTR, VAL, REL
Breier, Mignonne (2011)	IAC	QAL, QAN	DTP, DVD, DRT	Y	OTR
Sub-field 2: Policies and Qualifications Framework in RPL-APEL					
Guo, Shibao & Andersson, Per (2006)	IAC	NM	NM	Y	NM
Peters, Helen (2006)	IAC	QAL	NM	Y	NM
Cardeiro, Roberto (2011)	IAC	QAL	DCA, DTP	Y	NM
Harry, Judy (2011)	IAC	QAL	DVD, DTP	Y	NM
Mendonça, Maria & Carneiro, Maria (2011)	IAC	NM	NM	Y	NM
Whittaker, Ruth (2011)	IAC	QAL	NM	Y	NM
Wheelahan, Leesa (2006)	IAC	QAL	NM	Y	NM
Sub-field 3: RPL-APEL in Higher Education					
Pokorny, Helen (2006)	IAC	NM	NM	N	OTR, VAL
Sandberg, Fredrik; Andersson, Per (2011)	IAC	QAL	NM	Y	OTR, VAL
Stenlund, T. (2011)	IAC	QAL, QAN	DCS	Y	OTR, VAL, REL
Cameron, Roslyn (2011)	IAC	QAL, QAN	DTP, DVD, DCS	Y	OTR
Pokorny, Helen (2011)	IAC	NM	NM	Y	OTR, VAL
Travers, Nan (2011)	IAC	NM	DTP, DVJ, DCS, DVD, DRT	Y	NM
Wihak, Christine & Wong, Angelina (2011)	IAC	QAN	NM	Y	OTR
Wong, Angelina (2011)	IAC	NM QAL	DCA, NM, DTP, DVD, DRT	N	NM
Sub-field 4: Methodologies in RPL-APEL					
Andersson, Per (2006)	IAC	QAL	NM	Y	OTR, VAL, REL
Breier, Mignonne (2006)	IAC	QAL	NM	Y	NM
Shalem, Yael & Steinberg, Carola (2006)	IAC	NM	NM	Y	NM
Osman, Ruksana (2006)	IAC	QAL,	NM	Y	OTR
Bélisle, Rachel (2011)	IAC	QAL, QAN	DTP, DVJ, DVD, DRT	N	OTR
Van Kleef, Joy (2011)	IAC	QAL, QAN	DTP, DRT, DVD, DTD	Y	OTR
Werking, Patrick & Wihak, Christine (2011)	IAC	QAN, QAL	NM	Y	NM
Legend: General abbreviations					
NM : not mentioned Y : yes N : no					
3. Method of data analysis			3.3 Analytical categories for analyzing the contents		
IAC : Inherent application of elements of content analysis while not describing the research procedure explicitly					
ACA : Application of content analysis while not denominating the method's name explicitly					
EAC : Explicit application of content analysis					
3.1 Type of data analysis			4. Quality measures		
QAL : Qualitative analysis					
QAN : Quantitative analysis					
3.2 Descriptive analysis			REL : Reliability		
DCA : Distribution over countries of authors			DAI : Inter-rater agreement by discursive alignment of interpretations		
DTP : Distribution over the time period					
DVJ : Distribution over various journals			IRC : Inter-rater reliability measurements		
DCS : Distribution over case studies					
DVD : Distribution over various documents					
DRT : Distribution over research types					
Table adapted from Gold, S. (2011)					



## Evaluation and discussion of findings

The following describes the categories as they were applied to the body of literature selected for each of the sub-fields.

For the category '*data analysis methods*' all 31 documents in different subfields, have at least '*inherent elements of content analysis while not explicitly describing the procedure research*' meaning that none of the documents reviewed applies the method of content analysis with all its elements, and therefore neither are they explicitly named. This indicates that there is potential opportunity for the RLP-APEL field of study to implement all elements more systematically and completely; that is, to develop an 'application of content analysis denominating explicitly the method's name'.

While most of the documents mention the '*analytical categories for content analysis*' (29 papers), three of the documents neither describe categories analytically, nor do they mention the '*type of data analysis*'. In total, seven documents do not mention the type of analysis performed, but most of the 31 documents do not explicitly describe the research process, to identify the different steps for verification.

29 documents use an inductive or deductive way to structure the categories that have been used for the literature review.

Regarding the category '*Descriptive analysis*' - '*Distribution over the time period*' - only two documents presented explicit and structured criteria, nine (9) of the revised documents presented criteria in an implicit form, whereas (16 documents) show no descriptive analysis criteria. The number of documents that do not have this basic information as part of in the analysis is significant.

Only six documents explicitly mention the '*data collection method*'. Among these, one considers the criteria of '*non-formal collection items*' combined with '*cross-referencing for further relevant publications*' and only two documents mention the criteria '*Key word research in databases and library services*' and '*information request from academic colleagues*'. In the search for implicit evidence of criteria among sources, it was found that most use a combination of criteria, but the criteria that seem to operate well in deductive processes include the standard '*cross-referencing for further relevant publications*' and '*information request from academic colleagues*'. This is also the case in all but three of the documents for the criterion '*Research Limited to Certain journals*'.

Regarding the categories '*Number of documents reviewed*' and '*Name of journals cited*' only four sources mention these, of which only two address the criterion 'Period covered' in a structured manner. This means that 27 documents do not mention explicitly documents that were reviewed or the scientific journals cited. However, types and names of the journals could be identified in each document's references list.



The review process of the 31 documents revealed further that within the category '*Quality measures*', fifteen documents do not refer to quality criteria. Equally, among sixteen documents which can be characterized according to the criterion '*Objectivity and transparency*', eight include the criterion of '*Validity*' and five of those documents also include the criterion of '*Reliability*'. Furthermore, it should be noted that only one of the documents also includes the criterion '*Inter-rater reliability measurements*', while none mentioned the criterion of '*Inter-rater agreement by discursive alignment of interpretations*'.

## **Conclusions**

It can be argued that the application of Content Analysis methodology is a very useful tool for developing a critical literature review. Additionally, it allows greater transparency of the systematic process and can identify good or best practice in research, as well as identifying information gaps, and theoretical, empirical and methodological elements in the identified research topic. Nevertheless, these benefits are, of course, limited to the sample of documents that were reviewed.

Another point to mention is that this method makes it possible to analyse how a given subject was constructed during the period time under consideration, and this can support identification of robust theories and higher quality measures. Moreover, it can reveal the frequency of analysis categories and combinations of criteria appearing in the 'types of research methods' used. Although the scientific community in the field of 'VPL' whose work was included in the sample of analysed documents does not explicitly mention content analysis, all authors used elements of content analysis, and some more than others.

Finally, this chapter has exemplified content analysis as a methodology with the potential to offer greater rigour and transparency in research undertaken by the community working in the 'VPL' field. Therefore, the author argues that content analysis as part of critical literature review should be considered good research practice in the 'VPL' field.

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## Introduction

The issues of Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) and the Certification of Competency have only recently been prioritized in Italy. The application of European directives in this area has been rather slow and it has clashed with the division of institutional and functional competences in terms of instruction and professional development between State and Regions and between the several Ministries (Employment and University Education and Research) (Perulli, 2013). The acknowledgement in Italian rules of EFQ occurred rather late, and the use of the Dublin Descriptors in the field of tertiary education was only structurally adopted a few years ago, despite being one of the cornerstones of the "Bologna Process", launched in our country.

For a long time, competences were confined to vocational training; precisely because Regions had jurisdiction on this matter since the seventies, they felt the need to express the repertoire of qualifications of the vocational training system in terms of skills. It has only been over the past ten years that the institution of courses of *"education and vocational training"* parallel to upper secondary school<sup>22</sup>, and, most importantly, Higher Technical Education and Training<sup>23</sup>, have started offering formal learning paths defined in terms of skills and not just of learning results (Palumbo and Startari, 2013). Similarly, the introduction of the Citizen's Training Booklet has given rise to various changes in the Portfolio, which have helped to shift the focus from mere attainment of certification to actually underpinning learning in non-formal and informal contexts.

## The Introduction of Laws 28 and 92

The issue was truly tackled with Law 28 (June 2012, n. 92), which constitutes an important challenge for the certification of competences and for the role that the Universities must play in this field. In fact, Article 4 of this law dedicates extensive space to permanent learning, which is defined as *"any activity undertaken by people in a*

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22 I.e., Triennial Vocational Education and Training, which is being implemented pursuant to Law 52/2003, and which provides for a three-year post-secondary school in which the right-duty to education (up to age 16) and training (up to 18 years) is acquitted, which was introduced by this law.

23 Courses lasting 12-24 months post-graduation, offered jointly by upper secondary schools, vocational training institutions, businesses and universities, based on the German Fachhochschule model. The minimum standards of competence are defined in the State-Regions Conference.



*formal, non-formal and informal way, during the various phases of life, for the purpose of improving knowledge, capacities and competencies, from a personal, civic, social and occupational point of view*" (para. 51). This point of view is not limited to the work environment, but covers the whole spectrum of life and the entire range of individuals' life-worlds. The law defines what is meant by formal, non-formal and informal learning and considers they are equal in dignity (para. 52, 53, 54). It also provides for a unitary system, divided regionally, for the recognition and certification of skills, which combine all the training agencies (school, vocational training, universities, companies), with the active help of employment services and the Chambers of Commerce.

This constitutes a veritable Copernican revolution, whose most innovative features are detailed below:

- a. Recognition of an individual's right to acknowledgement of competencies, defining the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning such *services performed at the request of the interested party* (our emphasis), which must be guaranteed to all equally throughout the whole national territory;
- b. Provision for the acknowledgement of competences to be carried out by creating regional networks that include all the services of education, training and work. These networks also include universities, companies ("through the representatives of employers and trade unions") and Chambers of Commerce, i.e., all those who represent the supply and demand of competencies. With regard to universities in particular, the law states that their participation takes place "through the inclusion of lifelong learning in their institutional strategies, flexible and quality training options, which also includes distance learning, for a diverse student population, appropriate guidance and counselling, with national, European and international partnerships supporting the mobility of people and social and economic development."

The rule seems to be saying that the contribution of the University, which is relevant and acknowledged, may take place on condition that they are in fact qualified in the field of lifelong learning and are therefore able to place a diverse student population at the core of their educational offering and their institutional strategies, rather than the non-existent "average student" for whom such offering is designed today. Therefore it is an acknowledged role, but it is also legitimised both formally (through the inclusion in institutional strategies), as well as within their daily operations (see Palumbo and Startari, 2013).

In January 2013 a Legislative Decree (n. 13/2013) was approved making the main prescriptions of Law 92/2012 operative, specifically laying down the minimum standards of content, process and certification, to guarantee effective parity of treatment to potential users of a system which, articulated regionally, must acknowledge differences which are also consistent throughout the different areas of the Country. The current effort of national working groups is concentrated on the definition of a national repertoire of professional figures, with the intention of moving on, immediately



afterwards, to the definition of guidelines with which to implement the provision, that is, to make operative the right to certification of competencies.

Thus the relevance of the issue concerning the construction of the National Directory of professional profiles, closely linked to the issue of certification of skills, which is currently the subject of a complex project of aligning the professionals already declined in the individual Regional Directories. The discussion of the issue of certification of competences is closely related, in the current system, to the more general framework of certifications and to the legislative framework at the national and regional levels, which defines the types of certificates and who is responsible for the assessment of competences and their release. In the current framework<sup>24</sup> a “certificate of competence” is currently issued only by an Organisation or Agency of Professional Training or by the School.

### **Italian Universities and Lifelong Learning**

With regard to Italian universities it can be said that, before Law 92, Lifelong Learning in Italy was not considered a priority and has never been integrated in the system, despite numerous rather fragmented experiences. There were no frameworks, principles or guidelines that could incite universities to act in this field. In addition, the University Reform Law (240/2010) does not mention Permanent Learning (PL), nor does it allude to courses for employees or for adults. For this reason, University Statutes approved between 2011 and 2012 did not show particular awareness of Lifelong Learning to comply with the new law. However, in fact, many universities have meanwhile developed a growing awareness of the issue of PL, because over the years universities have carried out a significant number of initiatives of adult education and in support of the economy and territory. In November 2011, they also decided to set up the Network of Italian Universities for Lifelong Learning (RUIAP, by its initials in Italian), as an instrument of coordination and lobbying aimed at the recognition of this important function of University (see [www.ruiap.it](http://www.ruiap.it)). Currently, the Network provides the important function of interlocution with the Ministry and the different stakeholders, and concentrates its action on the promotion and coordination of national and local initiatives in favour of PL and the certification of competences.

At the same time, throughout the country, even before the approval of Law 92/2012, there have been developments at the regional level that are committed to implement a system of identification, recognition, validation and certification<sup>25</sup>. In this regard, the University of Genoa has created experiences of assessment and certification of

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24 See: [www.nrpitalia.it](http://www.nrpitalia.it)

25 Certification systems, validation and recognition of credits in many Regions (including Valle D'Aosta, Lombardy, Emilia Romagna, Tuscany, Sardinia, Lazio, Veneto, Umbria, Liguria); experiences of testing the Citizen Training Booklet developed in 13 regions between 2007 and 2010; numerous trials conducted in response to the crisis, such as testing of a path of upskilling with NUP, Standard and Booklet as part of the Active Policies to combat the crisis in the Veneto Region; experiences in innovative projects also funded through European programmes such as Leonardo, Equal or others. Some of the experiences are described in Reggio and Righetti (eds., 2013).



competences in high street apprenticeship projects, on journeys of Higher Technical Education Training (IFTTS, by its initials in Italian), in joint training courses for teachers and trainers, and in the context of the European project IDEAL (*Identifier, Evaluer et Valider: Transfer et adaptation d'un dispositif de validation des acquis formels et informels*). In the latter case, the University of Genoa has adopted the French model of certification of prior experience in terms of university credit and the possibility of integrating people into customised university courses with the purpose of earning a degree. All these experiences have enhanced the matching of different types of learning produced in the world of work and the knowledge produced in academia, which do not always overlap. This has led to the definition of new strategies for teaching programmes, the development of specific methods of monitoring and evaluation and the improvement of the offering for adults who want to resume their studies in order to gain an advantage in the labour market. In addition, the tested model puts people in the position of having to make an assessment of their own experiences in order to translate their learning into competences, to improve their professional competitiveness, to re-evaluate it or re-enter it into the system.

All the experiences listed used methodologies accompanied by the Portfolio and the Citizen's Training Booklet which have allowed the establishment of a common ground in terms of vocabulary and methodology. This has led to the clarification of substantial differences between transformation of learning into credits and the certification of competences, to create a projected cultural shift towards learning based on the competences model and enhancing the value of the acquisition of formal, non-formal and informal learning.

### **The University of Genoa Experience**

The experiences gained over the years in Genoa allowed the university to give birth to a research project: "*Defining a model of certification, integration and validation of competences acquired during professional development courses and training*", which has involved a large distribution company, a consortium of social cooperatives, the School of Social Sciences through the Department of Education.

In the experience shared with the Agora Consortium, 20 participants were involved initially. They were asked to develop a process for the certification of non-formal and informal learning in the context of a university course. However, the lack of a national system of validation and certification and acknowledgement of competences discouraged many of the participants. Both are requirements that the implementation of Law 92 and Decree 13/2013 must allow, but at the beginning, the research project was ahead of time.

The first step of the research has focused on the preparation of the portfolio, which has proved to be complex for both the mentor and the candidate. They faced difficulties in conceptualising the personal and professional biography: all experiences seem important to them and they are not always able to recognise the ones that are really valuable for creating a balance of experiences in order to transfer formal, non-formal and informal



learning into competences and ECTS. In the end, the competence profile to which the experiences of the candidates were transferred was declined by the Liguria Region Professional Inventory (<http://labprofessioni.regione.liguria.it/>).

The mentoring activity provided some interviews to identify key biographical details. Each candidate's stages of initial education, continuing education, professional experienced personal experiences and the current situation were analysed with the candidate. They are specified in terms of objectives, programmes developed and contributions made by various experiences, in order to help the candidates to develop their own awareness of the professional currency of such experiences. Each candidate's profile can be used as a resource to support a proposition for the certification of competences and the validation of prior learning or to identify which higher education course would be best suited to the candidate. The portfolio has thus been designed with two objectives in mind: to certify, where possible, the competences of a specific professional figure, and to identify education and training courses which allow the acquisition of a qualification, diploma, degree, and so on, through the validation of non-formal and informal learning in terms of university credits (ECTS).

With Co-op Liguria (Large Retail Division) the processes, methodologies and assessment of staff training programs have been examined and it was decided to try, in collaboration with the University's Department of Economics, to customise the prior learning and professional skills training carried out for the "Assistant Head of Department" profile. At the same time, the "Assistant Head of Department" profile for the Large Retail Division was defined as part of the development of a regional catalogue of professional roles. In this way, through an inverse operation carried out by the analysis of work processes presented by both the company and the candidate, the implicit and developed professional skills have been identified and included in a regional catalogue of professional roles.

Currently the initial phases of the process of certification and validation of prior learning and skills are being developed, through<sup>26</sup>:

- The identification of the professional profile which we intend to adopt for the certification of competences and/or credits for a customised university course. This first step involves an interview that explores the concrete practices put in place by the candidates, and attempts to highlight the connections with the path that will be chosen.

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26 The process steps are defined by Legislative Decree 13/2013 (Article 5) and consist of the following phases:

- identification of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning,
- documentation of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning,
- assessment of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning,
- certification of the results of the assessment of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning in the form of a qualification, or credits leading to a qualification, or in another form, as appropriate.



- The mentorship: in the preparation of personal portfolio, self-assessment, selection of certifiable competences and identification of the real situations in which the person applied the competences themselves. An interview is carried out with the person interested in the certification, as well as an interview with the contact person in the company and the development of a design that can document the implementation of competences referenced. The model, which will be implemented at the national level, is actually an experiment. Given the difficulty cited above - the law is currently limited to 12 ECTS maximum certifiable based on non-formal and informal learning - at the university level the model is being tested via the use of the "case study, which represents the only technical form to resume an incomplete university course"<sup>27</sup>. The case study is accompanied by the analysis of the "curriculum" of the chosen academic address, which follows a reverse process: from the learning outcomes provided by the teaching modules we go back to the total or partial possession of these by the person involved, in order to customise the training course and the study load.

For use in the professional field, there is the question of whether to carry out a 360° multi-rater interview with the company manager, colleague and participant on the behaviour of the subject, namely on "how" he behaves professionally. This would provide a diagnosis from multiple perspectives, with the ability to detect the competences that are more difficult to assess: those that are part of the personal assets of the participant and allow him to effectively combine his internal resources with external ones.

If the multi-rater proves too complicated, we plan to resort to a BEI<sup>28</sup>: (Behavioural Events Interview), which aims to seek the possession of specific competences characterising a specific task, therefore seeking, for example, the features of success in a particular job role. The aim is to shed light on the individual's ways of acting and thinking. It is an interview in which the interviewee is asked to provide a detailed account of three events that were critical and successful and three that were unsuccessful, faced in the work environment.

The research is still in its development phase and is showing the importance of mentor's ability to handle all the difficulties. It has revealed especially the risk of falling into the "trap" of declaring the possession of competences through the story of what the person has done, and merely presenting the documentation to "certify" the story. Instead, it is necessary to be very aware that this is a thoughtful and reasoned narrative that supports the meaning of acting (Righetti, 2013) That means the ability to reason about what has been done and the resources that have been mobilised to achieve the result or to implement the performance. This analysis is not always easy for VPL candidates and requires the support of a qualified mentor.

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<sup>27</sup> The case study allows the students to get to know, even without actually registering, the credits related to previous courses that would be credited if they register in a degree course.

<sup>28</sup> For the Multirater and Bei tools, see Seegers in Oggioni and Rolandi, 1998.



The next schedule of work consists of a meeting with the Education Committee overseeing the degree course, in order that confirmation of the activities can be confirmed; that is whether, with the existing conditions of the law, ECTS deriving from certified learning would be truly recognised. Additionally, this meeting will provide an opportunity to evaluate whether, at the stage where it waits for the full operation of the decree, it is possible to create personalised study plans that allow VPL to influence adaptations to individuals' taught degree elements and examination schedules.

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# Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) in the context of Slovenian higher education – a case study

# 11

Metka Uršič and Sergij Gabršček

## Introduction

People are constantly learning everywhere and at all times. Not a single day goes by that does not lead to additional skills, knowledge and competences for all individuals. For people outside the formal education and training system - adults in particular - it is very likely that this learning, taking place at home, in the workplace or elsewhere, is much 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 formal education and training institutions – can be a rich source of human capital. Validation of prior learning – especially of non-formal and informal learning outcomes - makes this human capital more visible and more valuable to society at large.

Learning that occurs outside the formal learning system has not been well understood, made visible or - probably as a consequence - appropriately valued till the end of the last century, when the concept of lifelong learning emerged. In 1996, the OECD education ministers agreed to develop strategies for “lifelong learning for all”. It is the concept of “learning from cradle to grave” and includes formal, non-formal, and informal learning.

What are the non-formal and informal learning? One of the definitions describes them in the following way:

- non-formal learning means learning which takes place through planned activities (in terms of learning objectives, learning time) where some form of learning support is present (e.g. student-teacher relationships); it may cover programmes to impart work skills, adult literacy and basic education for early school leavers; very common cases of non-formal learning include in-company training, through which companies update and improve the skills of their workers such as ICT skills, structured on-line learning (e.g. by making use of open educational resources), and courses organised by civil society organisations for their members, their target group or the general public;
- informal learning means learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure and is not organised or structured in terms of



objectives, time or learning support; it may be unintentional from the learner's perspective; examples of learning outcomes acquired through informal learning are skills acquired through life and work experiences, project management skills or ICT skills acquired at work, languages learned and intercultural skills acquired during a stay in another country, ICT skills acquired outside work, skills acquired through participation in different activities.

Non-formal and informal learning are happening everywhere all the time and individuals engaging in a recognition process for their non-formal and informal learning outcomes should be awarded a document that has social value and is widely recognised so that they can benefit from it, when returning to the formal lifelong learning system or to the labour market. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning is an important means for reshaping learning to better match the needs of the 21st century knowledge economies and open societies.

### **Policy initiatives in Europe**

The importance to Europe (though not just to Europe) of a skilled and knowledgeable society extends beyond formal education to learning acquired in non-formal or informal ways. Non-formal and informal learning outcomes are viewed as having significant value. Individuals must be able to demonstrate what they have learned in order to use this learning in their careers and for further education and training. To do so, they must have access to a system which identifies, documents, assesses and validates all forms of learning.

The EU Council reached political agreement regarding a recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning: also one of the priorities of the Cyprus Presidency in the second half of 2012. It invited member states to put in place arrangements for validating these types of learning no later than 2018 – in accordance with national circumstances and specificities - and seeks to define which principles and components should be taken into account for a validation process to be effective.

Whilst acknowledging that the primary focus of the education system should remain on formal education and on endeavouring to ensure high quality learning outcomes for all pupils and students, the Presidency underlined that in today's situation of rising unemployment and lack of economic growth, making use of new learning opportunities and making the most of knowledge, skills and competences acquired outside formal education could play an important role in enhancing employability and mobility, as well as providing more motivation for lifelong learning, particularly in the case of socio-economically disadvantaged or low-qualified groups. The Commission also underlined the importance of the validation of formal and non/informal learning, especially in the current difficult unemployment situation facing many young people.



### **Where in the picture is Slovenia?**

Slovenia has a clear policy for validation of non-formal and informal learning, according to the 2007 National Strategy for Lifelong Learning. One of the main strategic objectives in relation to the Lisbon strategy is to “create the appropriate conditions for every person to be ensured opportunities for the full development of their abilities” and validation of non-formal and informal learning is an important element of this.

The National Vocational Qualification Act (NVQA), adopted in 2000 and revised in 2009, established the legal framework for validation. The Act enables the assessment and verification of vocation-related knowledge, skills and experiences acquired outside of formal education. It makes it possible for individuals to obtain a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) in recognition of prior learning and experiences. Providers have to take into account not only formal education, non-formal education or training provided by different institutions, but also informal learning experiences. Individuals have the right to validate their competences and skills, which can be recognised (through processes of validation) in the context of educational or training programmes. By making this connection between formal and non-formal and informal learning this Act also represents the basis for the implementation of the lifelong learning strategy in Slovenia. The NVQA established a certification system and regulates the procedures, bodies and organisations for approving standards for different vocational qualifications. Committees approve qualifications on the basis of the proposal prepared by relevant stakeholders. Part of the process of acquiring a particular qualification can also be the assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning. The system has been embedded since 2000, however, according to the anecdotal evidence available, the number of candidates and the extent of competences that are recognised using this mechanism does not meet expectations. Unfortunately there are no statistical data available for that particular aspect of the recognition. Equally, whilst the concept of validation of non-formal learning was introduced in 2007 in the formal VET system, a national system of validation covering all sectors/levels of learning does not exist in Slovenia.

In higher education (HE), a national system of recognition of non-formal and informal learning does not exist. The validation in higher education is very loosely regulated, although the current legislation provides the basis for accreditation of prior learning. It is left to higher education institutions (HEIs) to define the criteria for recognition of knowledge and skills gained before enrolment into the study programme.

In 2006, the Higher Educational Council, which is the national accreditation body, also adopted Criteria for the Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions and Study Programmes. It is stated that HEIs are responsible for accreditation of formally, non-formally and experientially acquired knowledge and skills, which



correspond to their study programmes. This applies to undergraduate and postgraduate level. However, that recognition cannot lead to the full qualification on its own merits. The recognised knowledge can serve only two purposes: fulfilling entry requirement to a study programme or as a fulfilling study obligations in regard to a certain number of credits.

### **Madame L. – the case**

To illustrate the process and the challenges of the validation of prior learning and the extent of the recognition, we have selected the case of one individual who applied for the process of the recognition of her prior learning, both the non-formal as part of her training and upgrading of her education and the informal, developed during her work in different roles in the institutions she was working in. She was selected from a sample of mature students who were contacted and interviewed during the research into the experience of individual mature students (from the group of 50+) who had decided to enrol to higher education institutions.

Madam L. is the head teacher of a primary school in a small Slovenian city. She is an experienced teacher, professional in her teaching area and belongs to the group of 50+. When, in 2011, she assumed the function of acting head teacher, she was not fulfilling required conditions for the position of the head teacher, therefore she decided to enrol in a one-year post-graduate Master's programme (the second cycle according to Bologna structure) of the programme *Leadership and Quality in Education* at the accredited HEI which would enable her to acquire the needed educational degree and to acquire the needed knowledge and skills in the required time.

When she was considering the enrolment in the selected study course, Madam L. was confronted with the fact that – with regard to her previous education and with regard to the enrolment condition – she would need an additional study year. Why?

The enrolment condition was that the previous education was acquired in the framework of a four-year undergraduate study (according to the existing rules), while Madam L. acquired her previous education in a three-year undergraduate study that existed previously and was sufficient condition for the position she held at that time. At the end of 70s she finished additionally a two-and-a-half-year undergraduate study programme *Teacher Education* – subjects biology and chemistry – at one University, and in 2010 she graduated from a three-year undergraduate study programme - *Management* - at the Faculty of Management in another university. In her second programme, she enrolled directly into the third study year - after previously passing differential exams.

Following that experience, Madam L. contacted the HEI management, to whom she explained that to progress on her professional path, she would have to finish the study in one year, that she is prepared to do this, and asked the management to make this possible. The Faculty considered the following facts:



- in the framework of her undergraduate study she actually passed exams or study obligation to the extent of almost four years
- in the framework of her whole professional path she also educated herself non-formally a great deal,
- she had also acquired much work-based competences.

They proposed the process of recognition of this formal and non-formal education and acquired competences with the intention of release her from (some of) the study obligations at the faculty and by this, shortening the time of study.

During the recognition procedure, it was found that:

- her formal education could not be recognised for this programme as the examinations were mostly from another study area.
- the non-formal education and work-based competences could be recognised only for the amount that was equal to the number of credits for one subject (7 credits, with 60 credits needed for a full year). This meant that she was released from one examination only. Interestingly, additional independent work was not required and knowledge and competences were not verified.

Nevertheless, in spite of difficulties, Madam L. was as an earnest student who finished her required study in a little more than one year.

### **Lessons learned**

What can we learn from this example? What can we learn from experiences of other older adult candidates who went through the process of validation of non-formal and informal learning? Was she a special case or can we follow similar pattern with other students who went through the process of VPL?

There are different dimensions to the case presented. One is the perspective of an individual who has acquired certain skills and competences throughout his or her professional life, which is quite substantial, given we are looking at the population of 50+ with a long professional career and who would like to validate and recognise their competences for different purposes. In our cases we were looking at the enrolment to higher education programmes, although similar cases can be met also in the area of the national vocational qualifications, with slightly different issues.

The other perspective is that of an HEI or, in the optimal case, the perspective of the (general) HE system. This is particularly important in a country like Slovenia as VNIL is still a relatively new concept and much is still in the developmental phase. However, the case presented from one of the institutions is a typical one and can be found in other institutions that were contacted during the research period.



We will address the case from both perspectives, showing the benefits for partners in the process, and compare that with the experiences of other individuals from the same age group who had experience with the process in other institutions.

### **The institution – the process**

The actual process of validation and recognition of the prior learning follows the following main points regardless of the institution:

- Inventory of non-formal education and work-based competences that the candidate acquired during his or her professional path,
- Assessment of those competences according to the certain rules and procedures,
- Comparison of the non-formal education and work-based acquired competences with the required number of credit points in the study, with the aim of shortening the period of studies or releasing the candidates from certain subjects or modules in the programme.

The process is quite complex and includes a number of stakeholders and actors:

- In the set-up of the procedure for recognition of knowledge and skills at the Faculty the following stakeholders were involved in the case presented: expert collaborator for study affairs, Deputy Dean for Education and members of the Senate – who also passed the rules on recognition.
- In the carrying out of the procedure for recognition there were different actors: expert collaborator who advises student – the candidate for recognition – in preparing the application for recognition, lawyer who manages the procedure, and members of the Commission for recognition of knowledge and skills who treat the application and suggest decisions on recognition on the basis of which then the Dean takes the final decision (these members are HE teachers, of which at least one is partly employed outside the HE system).

The tools for recognition of knowledge and skills, which are mostly used at the faculties that carry out the recognition procedures, are the following:

- Portfolio of educational and professional path of the candidate for recognition: the folder of evidences on knowledge and skills acquired by the candidate This is the obligatory attachment to the application for recognition.
- Assessment methods: interview with the candidate, debate with the candidate, the portfolio, written projects, discussion about prepared project, assessment of demonstration, simulations, role playing, demonstrations.
- Candidate's CV, the obligatory attachment to the application.
- Forms Report for the purpose of recognition of professional practice, Report for the purpose of recognition of learning in practice, and Report for the purpose of recognition of project task, as the forms that are used in the validation process.

The student – the candidate for recognition – also has the possibility to complain against the final decision.



The introduction of the process of the validation of non-formal and informal learning in the Faculty where the case of Madame L. is taken from, provided the institution with the opportunity to develop the system and procedures based on the regulations that the HEI enacted. The development was part of the learning process, as it presented a departure from the traditional approach in HE of teaching and learning and recognition of knowledge via assessment of the subject. The institution proudly mentioned the following points as important for their work and future activities:

- The rules on recognition of knowledge and skills (formal, non-formal and work-based) were changed and supplemented – the new rules were passed by the Senate of the institution in 2012.
- The institution began with more intensive raising of awareness of students regarding the possibility of recognition of knowledge and skills, and particularly regarding the importance of a well prepared main attachment to the application for recognition – a portfolio of the individual's educational and professional path or the folder of evidences on knowledge and skills acquired by the individual on this path. The consequence of this awareness-raising is a bigger number of applications for recognition and also better prepared portfolios.
- A new report form for the purpose of recognition of professional practice (the tool for recognition) was developed – this is also the element of the study which can be transferred to other Slovenian and European faculties.

### **Individual students - the challenges**

The process of validation and recognition is relatively new in Slovenian HE system, although in vocational education and training it has been in place for some time. There are different aspects that hinder the broader use and acceptance of the validation of non-traditionally acquired knowledge and skills in higher education in Slovenia:

- *lack of awareness of VPL.* The validation of prior learning is generally not well known to individual candidates and they are often not aware of the possibility of gaining recognition of knowledge and competences they acquired outside the formal education system. The actual awareness of this option is mostly achieved using the word of mouth: shared experience of the candidates that actually went through the process. They are the best promoters of VPL, but also invaluable "testers" of the system in place, giving feedback and with their experience providing the impetus for improvement of the process
- *lack of information.* Information about the possibility of VPL is often not readily available or at least not widely publicised. For different reasons it is still seen as inferior to formal education and competences achieved in the traditional way. It also requires extra work from the actors and it is often seen as labour intensive activity outside the well greased wheels of the education routine in the institution. Often, lack of information prevents individuals from asking for VPL.
- *Formalisation of the process.* The teaching and learning process in HEIs is based on subjects and modules. In the process of validation and recognition (as in case



with the formal education recognition) too much focus is put on the actual comparison of the non-formal and informal learning with the content of the subject or module, instead of the outcomes or the competences that the student should develop during and at the end of the study.

- *Limitation of VNIL to parts of the programme.* The system in place only provided possibility of recognising acquired knowledge, skills and competences to subject, modules or parts of the actual HE programmes. It does not allow for the process to be implemented for the whole degree, as it is the case, for example, in France. This shows that the VPL is still seen through the eyes of the formal system and not as a parallel approach.
- *Lack of confidence.* There is lack of confidence in the quality and relevance not only of the recognition but even more importantly, in the actual knowledge and skills acquired outside the formal system, on both sides. This is the legacy of the overarching importance of the academic education, which can be obtained only through the formal system. An important element is overlooked though: the experience that is brought by individuals, from which the HE system could benefit, as they bring real life experiences that enrich the academic teaching.
- *Transparency.* Anecdotal evidence shows that sometimes the VPL process is seen as a shortcut for achieving an HE degree but some cases that were widely publicised by media indictate that the process lacks transparency. It should be clearly demonstrated that this is not the case, as this situation can damage not only the image but also the very process itself, damaging both the candidate and the institution that would probably try to avoid the process in the future.
- *Financing.* The process of VPL is costly and resources have to be provided to cover the costs of the process. It often requires more work than the traditional teaching process and it is often seen as an additional burden to teaching staff. Financing should not be the sole responsibility of individual students but an equal part of the system of financing of the higher education.

## Conclusion

Validation of non-formal and informal learning could be an important mechanism for learners in the 50+ group, as they had developed a number of competences during their professional and personal lives. This is particularly important for those who, for different reasons, decide to enrol to the HEI to obtain a further education qualification. The present system does not support this approach as equal to the traditional, formal one. However there are developments that give hopes, in the light of soft pressure from the EU for broadening the process as part of the lifelong learning process. Experiences of individual institutions and individuals help in further development of the system. Nevertheless, more has to be done to enhance awareness building of potential opportunities, information and the support of candidates, particularly in instances when they meet with resistance from the institutions and they lack the assertiveness that may be needed to achieve VPL success. There is another danger: over-formalisation of



procedures and requirements for the VPL. The VPL options should be embedded in the actual HE programmes as an integral part of the modules.

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## Introduction

The most important educational scheme needed for the transition from school-based education to lifelong learning is a system which can assess, validate and recognise a variety of learning which is freely done outside the formal education system. Studies and discussions regarding this system started to increase in 1980s, and it has emerged as one of major issues in the lifelong education field since 2000 (Abrahamsson, 1989; Thomas, 2000; Duvekot and Geerts, 2012).

Although assessment, recognition, validation and accreditation are closely interconnected actions on the learning, each has a peculiar feature as Duvekot (2014: 26-27) describes. Therefore one of them can be selected in accordance with a purpose. But the UIL of UNESCO adopts the term 'RVA' (Recognition, Validation and Accreditation), which appears to take a comprehensive approach to this issue rather than to take a selective approach focusing on any of them. This paper places its focus on the Validation of Prior Learning (VPL).

VPL, or RVA in a broader sense, has been developed with different purposes and procedures according to different countries' needs. The EU is trying to devise a measure to improve compatibility among its member states. UNESCO suggests a basic direction by publication of 'UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation, Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning' (2012). However, as VPL remains at an early stage of the development, each country or region shall continue to conduct trials and experiments for the time being. Various discussions and experimental trials are needed in the process of creating a momentous system for the learning era. In this sense, it is all the more meaningful for participants from many countries to deliver a presentation on the case of each country and organisation for this biennale.

Although VPL practices in Europe and North America vary depending on each country, a characteristic common to most of them could be said to be that they focus on helping those adults and underprivileged who have difficulties entering higher education institutions. The European and American way was to assist the indigent learners' entrance to university by validating what they learned outside of the formal education



system. In comparison, VPL in Korea was developed for a different purpose. Korea started to implement VPL in 1990 with the introduction of the Bachelor's Degree Examination for Self-Education (BDES), which has paved the way for self-taught learners to obtain academic degrees through a qualifying examination without entering to a higher education institution. The BDES recognizes knowledge and ability gained outside the formal education system. That is to say, the system helps self-taught learners, not for admission to college but for earning degrees without going to a higher educational institution. The Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS) is also a degree grant system regardless of enrolment to higher education. The ACBS, started in 1997, recognises diverse learning experiences as credits to award a degree when a learner accumulates the required number of credits.

Korea's VPL focus on helping learners earn degrees without entering to or finishing a higher education reflects the country's unique educational culture that has been maintained throughout a long history of Korea. In other words, Korea had operated a system, which recognised non-formal learning of self-taught learners through qualifying examinations, along with the formal school education system. In Korean history, the national civil service examination to select government officials, called 'Gwageo', has served as the axis of the Korean educational culture. Such an educational culture still has a strong influence on today's Korean educational system and practices.

This paper intends to reveal similarities and differences of Korean VPL compared with other countries by looking into the characteristics of its functions and operational processes. By identifying the particular features of the Korean version compared to those of Europe and North America, this paper is expected to contribute to expanding the scope of ongoing discussions about VPL in each country and at an international level including the EU and the UNESCO.

It is desirable to diversify the experimental practices of the VPL, RPL or APL in as many different ways as possible within the allowable scope in order to secure their compatibility between countries. Although there seems to be an ongoing effort to converge them into a unified method at an international level, however, it is critical to consider various measures including heterogeneous cases like Korea at this phase of exploratory discourses and trials. First, this paper will reveal that for some time, Korea has had a social scheme equivalent to today's VPL by reviewing the characteristics and interrelationship of 'the National Civil Service Examination' and the traditional school system that have served as the foundation of Korean educational culture. Second, it will specify the details and characteristics of Korea's current VPL system. And finally, the paper will discuss potential development based on major pending issues and tasks.

### **The National Civil Service Examination as VPL in Korean History**

The first state-run school, called 'Taehak', was established in the 4th century in Korea. This national education institution was responsible for educating some of the male ruling class to appoint them as officials, or to grant social status to the graduates. Although an increasing number of people wanted to enter the school, the government could not



afford to finance the required education budget. As a result, private schools named 'Gyeongdang' started to spring up. Since then, the number of private academic institutions exceeded that of the state and public schools in most of the periods of time in the old Korea.

Korea's ancient schools developed into three levels of education. The primary education institution was called 'Seodang'; the secondary education institutions included 'Sahak,' 'Hyanggyo' and 'Seowon'; the advanced education institution was named 'Seonggyungwan' or 'the Royal College,' which had served as the foundation of the education system for about 500 years of the Choseon Dynasty era. The education content focused solely on the Confucianism. At the primary level, students were taught about Chinese characters and the basics of Confucianism. As they advanced to higher levels, they learned about the classics and philosophy of Confucianism as well as poems, treatises and state policies. As the educational contents of both national and private schools were closely related with Confucianism, they were not different in the curriculum and purpose of education.

In addition to the Confucianism-centered educational institutions, there were other academic institutions, which were responsible for military education and professional skills education. In terms of military education, the army-training center taught fighting skills, horse riding, and military operation strategies. Professional skills education included learning a foreign language, medicine, astronomy, laws, mathematics, and arts with each delivered by their respective administration. In these schools, the learning progress of a student was checked by regular examinations, just as today's schools and universities, and a comprehensive evaluation took place at the time of completion.

In the 10th century, the National Civil Service Examination (NCSE) or 'Gwageo' was introduced from China. The main function of the state-run examination was to appoint government officials and grant social status to those who were qualified. Although the operation of the NCSE varied depended on eras, it consisted of three departments during the Choseon dynasty since the 15th century: "literary", "military", and "miscellaneous". The literary examination was to appoint high-ranking officials, and the military examination was to select military officers. The miscellaneous examination was to select professional officers including foreign languages, medicine, astronomy and geography and laws (Lee, 2000:162).

Among three categories of the national examination, the literary examination was the most important on a national level and this enjoyed the highest prestige. The literary examination consisted of three stages; an initial qualifying test ('Chosi') administered in the provinces, a second examination ('Boksi') conducted in the capital and the final examination ('Jeonsi') in the presence of the King at the royal palace. Those who passed the final examination were appointed to high-ranking positions. Even those who passed the first-round examination were given the corresponding social status and were appointed to public positions of the local authorities.



In terms of social function, schools were much aligned with the national examination. In the early stage of the introduction, the ancient national examinations in Korea were closely connected to schools as was often the case in China. In other words, the national examinations served as a graduation examination of a school. That explained why learners often skipped the national examination in China during the eras when the mere graduation from a school was considered enough to validate their academic achievement (Korean Academic Society of History, 1981:109-110).

However, Korea placed greater emphasis on the national examination than on the school examination. This was due to the fact that those who did not graduate from a school were still eligible for the national civil service examination. Many people who neither enrolled at nor graduated from the Royal College could apply directly for the highest level of the national examinations, by studying at a private cramming school or through self-education. During about 500 years of the Choseon dynasty, those who did not take a college course accounted for almost half of those who passed the national civil service examinations (Lee, 2000: 138-139).

It required a substantial amount of money to prepare for the national civil service examination with the help of a cramming school or under the guidance of a private tutor. Therefore, only the sons of the upper class with high incomes or of the intellectual class could afford them. Most of the ruling class ignored the school education and opted to secure social status through a private preparation to the national examination. Over a long period of time, this has become a part of the educational culture of Korea.

The national civil service examination, which allowed those who did not have formal schooling to become government officials, performed another function from an educational point of view. It gave a learning opportunity to those who failed to adjust to a school which was characterised by the uniformity and rigidity of a collective education and which ignored individual characteristics of learners. Therefore, it actually created an opportunity and environment for them to learn in a more suitable way, depending on individual aptitude and abilities. This is very similar to today's home schooling, in which learners can study with a freedom to choose a learning method more suitable to their individual characteristics and earn certificates by getting an evaluation of what they have learned from a school or an education office. In that sense, the national examinations in Korean history were part of a system that encouraged individual learners to study with more freedom and gave a social recognition to their academic achievement. This has continued as one of the features of the Korean educational culture.

Korea's traditional school system and the national civil service examination have been discontinued owing to the introduction of a western school-centred education system in the late 19th century. Nevertheless, the influence of the examination-oriented education culture which has been passed down for more than hundreds of years is still palpable. One of the characteristics of today's Korean educational behaviours is an obsession with



examinations, in which Korean people can sacrifice almost everything for the preparation of an examination. Its unique education culture characterised by this obsession with preparation for examinations has strong traction among Korean people to this day.

In the meantime, another feature of the Korean education culture is an increasing trend of performing an individualised way of learning in a variety of situations without depending on the school system. In Korea, there are many academic institutions outside of the formal education system, which teach learners about a variety of academic fields including industrial technology, business management, information technology, medical technology, cooking, costume design, foreign languages, physical education, music, arts. All of these belong to the non-formal education category, which teach learners in consideration of the needs and characteristics of learners, and are the for-profit private institutions which are run by tuition fees. There are a number of college students or graduates who are trying to complement theory based college education with on-the-spot education taught by those for-profit private institutions.

As such, a heritage of historical examination-oriented education culture still remains to be found in at least two sectors: one is the university entrance examination and the other is the Validation of Prior Learning (VPL). It is widely known that Korean high school students are devoted to preparing for the college entrance examination, and that private preparatory schools outside the formal education system are prospering. A detailed discussion about the cultural roots of the college entrance examination in Korea will be provided on another occasion. Another sector which is strongly influenced by the examination-oriented education culture is VPL, which is the theme of this paper. In the following section, I am going to reveal the inclination towards VPL practice in Korea.

### **Current Status of VPL**

School education in Korea has expanded rapidly since the World War II. The primary and secondary education sectors became widespread during the period of the 1950s to the 1970s. Since the 1980s, the higher education sector has grown at a rapid rate. According to government statistics, 78 per cent of high school graduates entered higher education institutions in 2009. As a result, a majority of the youth population belong to the highly educated class which has earned degrees from a university or college.

Inevitably, the seats at the higher education institutions are filled with adolescents aged around 20 years old. As an increasing number of people want to go to the university and the entrance examination procedure is more favourable for new graduates from high school, adults are actually blocked from entering the university. Moreover, because the competition to enter the university has become more and more intense, it is almost impossible for adult learners to win over their adolescent counterparts. As a result, the education gap between the generations has widened, which has left the older generation feeling insecure about their social and professional status. Therefore, a new social challenge to extend the opportunity for advanced education to the adult population has emerged.



The first policy measure to expand the opportunity of higher education to adults was the establishment of the Korean Open University in the early 1970s. The Korean Open University provides a chance for adults who are not in a position to enter a conventional university and bestows degrees to them. However, the Open University alone cannot meet the increasing desire of adult learners for higher education. As an innovative alternative to solve this situation, the Bachelor's Degree Examination for Self-Education (BDES) and the Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS) came into operation in 1990 and 1997, respectively. These two measures were designed neither to help adults enter a university nor to expand the opportunities for higher education to adults. Rather, these new systems have been devised to grant degrees directly through a proper evaluation and validation procedure to those who learn outside of the formal education system and reach the corresponding level of academic achievement. There follows a description of the outline of the two measures: A) The Bachelor's Degree Examination for Self-Education (BDES) and B) The Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS).

#### ***A) The Bachelor's Degree Examination for Self-Education (BDES)***

The Bachelor's Degree Examination for Self-Education emerged in 1990 as an alternative track that awarded a bachelor degree based on a series of examinations only without attending a higher education institution. The BDES aimed to provide the opportunity of obtaining higher education degree for adult learners of self education who cannot afford university education due to the various reasons such as economic constraint, time limitation, health, and so on. Almost all universities in Korea have charged students very high tuition fees but those students have mostly been young and full-time. Therefore it has been extremely difficult for adult learners, particularly from low income classes, to attend university education. The idea of the BDES emerged in that context.

The BDES consists of the four stages of qualifying examinations: general examination, major basic examination, major advanced examination, and comprehensive examination. According to the Manual for BDES of the National Institution for Lifelong Education that manages the examination, the stages of the examinations are operated as follows (NILE, 2012):

##### The 1st Stage of the Qualifying Examination of Liberal Arts

Evaluating general knowledge taught at university.

Eligible: those who have at least a higher secondary school diploma or equivalent.

##### The 2nd Stage of the Qualifying Examination on Major-Basic

Evaluating basic-level knowledge and academic skills for each major.

Eligible: those who passed the 1st stage of examination, or those who completed at least a year of university or equivalent.

##### The 3rd Stage of the Qualifying Examination on Major-Advanced

Evaluating in-depth and professional knowledge and academic skills for each major.



Eligible: Those who passed the 2nd stage of examination, or those who completed at least two years of university or equivalent.

#### The 4th Stage of the Qualifying Examination for Comprehensive Final

Evaluating general knowledge and academic skills, both at general and professional levels.

Eligible: those who passed the 3rd stage of examination, or those who completed at least three years of university or equivalent.

Learners who have already achieved a certain number of credits from university and who obtained certificates of concerned area can be exempt from one or two examinations. The National Institution for Lifelong Education (NILE) operates the BDES in 12 major fields of study including Accounting, Chinese Language, Computer Science for example, and for each, university faculty members manage the examinations. A total of 14,000 persons have been awarded the bachelor's degrees since 1990. It is noteworthy that the national examinations of the old Korea worked for the upper classes, but conversely, today's BDES takes care of underprivileged people.

#### ***B. The Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS)***

When the Presidential Commission of Education Reform proclaimed the vision of the New Education System on 31 May, 1995, it delineated the vision as "a society of open and lifelong learning in which everyone is entitled to equal and easy access to education at any time and place". As one of the measures to realise this vision, the Commission proposed the introduction of the ACBS which was an alternative way of obtaining degree of the higher education without enrolling university.

The ACBS is so inclusive and permissive that it acknowledges a wide range of learning that occurs in non-formal education, work places, military training and so on. It also approves training programs operated by firms as viable credits on the arrangement with the National Technical Qualification and the National Competency Standards. The minimum number of credits is 140 for awarding a four-year university degree, the sum of 120 credits for a three-year junior college degree, and the sum of 80 credits for a two-year junior college degree. About 50,000 learners were granted a degree for 109 major fields of study by this system in 2013. More than 70 per cent of the degree awardees were 30 years of age or older (NILE, 2013).

One of the noticeable programs of the ACBS is the validation of successors' learning of traditional arts and crafts transmitted from intangible cultural properties that have been little respected or recognised by modern universities. The degree award by the validation of non-formal learning in traditional arts and crafts through the ACBS has activated the increase of learning in the field that has been neglected by the public until recently. At present, a total of 11 educational institutions participate in this program. Part of the success of the program is clearly manifested in the process of validation as a powerful instrument for the revival of a neglected culture.



Another feature of the ACBS is the validation of learning acquired during the service in the army. Every Korean young man is enlisted to mandatory military service for two years longer than was the case in the past. In 2007, the Ministers of Education and Defence made an agreement that formulated a procedure of recognition of the learning acquired in education and training during military service. The credits obtained through the program can be utilised for acquiring a higher education degree through the ACBS, or for taking vocational qualifications and licences. About 310,000 soldiers and officers obtained credits during the years 2007-2012.

Moreover, the headquarters of the ACBS in the National Institution for Lifelong Education has recently made more effort to explore new fields of study that have not been properly acknowledged within conventional higher education.

### **New Developments**

While VPL in Korea is in operation on the basis of the two systems mentioned above, a solid endeavour is underway to develop some other methods to expand VPL. Three of these new attempts deserve much attention. The first is the validation of workplace experiences and learning; the second is nurturing a lifelong learning-centered university; the last is the lifelong learning account system (LLAS).

#### *Validation of Workplace Experiences*

In Korea, a number of laws relevant to vocational qualifications have recently been revised or newly enacted in order to activate VPL in the workplace. Despite an increase in the number of licences certified by private institutions, the state-issued certificates and licenses are dominant in terms of public confidence in Korea. Therefore, revision and enactment of laws was needed for an amplification of the recognition and validation of workplace experiences.

Until recently, the certification of workplace has been closely related to school education. Except for low-skilled technicians, anyone wishing to earn a technician qualification had to complete a secondary level education. The college degree used to be required as the minimum qualification to achieve an advanced level of certificate. As validation of workplace experiences was too strongly connected to school or university, the supply and quality of skilled workforce were mismatched to the requirements of the workplace. Not least because schools and universities place their focus on theory-based education, its usefulness in the workplace often falls short of expectation.

The government is trying to devise measures to enhance the on-site usefulness of skilled technicians and to meet the needs of the workplace by revising the existing laws and by enacting new laws. One such is the law designed to expand the validation of workplace experiences and learning. For example, the government has started to extend the eligibility for technical qualifications once limited to the graduates of higher education to those marine engineers who work on cargo ships or deep sea fishing vessels without the higher education. If they complete systematic workplace training and practice



successfully, the marine engineer qualification is conferred on them after evaluating the values of their learning and experiences in the workplace. Since the revision of the 'Seaman Law' in 2008, the government has presented validation of prior learning to 80 marine engineers each year (Taekhoon Kim, 2014: 33-35). When this program – currently under deliberation - is recognised by the ACBS, the route to a higher education degree will be open to those who have gained the engineer qualification. The validation of workplace experiences and learning is expected to allow more workers and learners in various technology fields to skip a university course yet earn a degree.

### *Lifelong Learning-Oriented University*

'Lifelong Learning-Oriented University' is the title of a project which was initiated by the Ministry of Education in 2012 to encourage universities to become institutions more appropriate for the lifelong learning age. In other words, the initiative is designed to transform universities into 'adult learner-friendly' institutions. Those universities which participated in the project were provided with the government's financial support. In this project, two programs are particularly noteworthy: one program is the "Employment first, Entering university later", and the other is "Industry-entrusted Higher Education".

The "Employment first, Entering university later" is a program which supports those high school graduates who choose to work for a certain period of time before entering university. Unlike ordinary applicants who have to undergo the college entrance examination, they are given an evaluation on what they experience and learn in an industrial workplace. In other words, their prior learning is assessed and validated to decide their admission to higher education. This is the typical validation of prior learning for college admission which is currently being implemented by many countries. This program will become more common in the coming years as an increasing number of adult learners aspire for higher education.

In the meantime, 'Industry-entrusted Higher Education' is a program in which an industrial company entrusts their employees to a university in accordance with a university-industry co-operative agreement. To earn a degree through the industry-entrusted program, an applicant must be one of the registered learners. To register for the program, they have to undergo the VPL procedure to obtain recognition for what they learn and experience at an industrial company. Their admission to college will be determined through VPL.

As mentioned above, VPL is an important part of the 'Lifelong Learning Oriented University' project. Therefore, in order to transform a higher education institution into an adult learner-friendly university, it is essential to develop the VPL system, and VPL will play a pivotal role in higher education and vocational training in the era of lifelong education.

### *Lifelong Learning Account System*

The Lifelong Learning Account System was conceived as an overarching management



system of the lifelong learning society for accumulation, assessment, validation, and recognition of each individual's wide-ranging learning. The philosophy of the LLAS is that all kinds of learning deserve to be recognised whether they have been acquired through formal education or non-formal as well as informal situations. The LLAS was recommended by the Presidential Commission of Education Reform in 1995, but it was not until 2010 that it was implemented.

The National Institution for Lifelong Education takes charge of the operation of LLAS. Learners are encouraged to register their records of learning such as schooling, learning portfolios, technical certificates and license, and formal, non-formal and informal learning at the LLAS centre, which recognises and validates the learning for educational qualifications or credentials, for vocational qualifications or certificates, and for job competences. About 5,000 learners are registered at present. The LLAS is in the stage of demonstration and refinement (Han, 2010: 57). Although the system is at a very early stage, it is expected to develop rapidly into the future

### **Prospects**

In a sense, it can be said that Korea has a long history of VPL. It is noteworthy that for almost 1,000 years, Korea has maintained the system which allows an opportunity to rise to officialdom or achieve social status for those who did not enrol in formal education or who failed to complete it, by validating what they have learned with their most effective learning method through the national examination. It is also meaningful that the national examination was implemented in parallel with the systematic school system. Although the national examination was abolished in the late 19th century when Korea started to introduce the western education system, the heritage of such an educational culture is still discernible.

It can be said that today's ways of validating both informal and non-formal education through examination and granting degrees by recognising informal education through a validation procedure embody the traditional education culture that has developed throughout history. The country's examination-oriented education culture, which has developed throughout a long history, still has a strong influence not only on Korea's education-related systems including VPL but also on the educational behaviours of the Korean people. To identify the characteristics of the Korean education system, it is important to understand the history of its examination-oriented educational culture. However, VPL in Korea does not merely reflect the traditional education culture. The country is also making relentless efforts to develop a new system to meet a change in social demand brought about by a new era. The fact that Korea's VPL is developing rapidly to meet changing social demands is attested to by its efforts to preserve a disappearing traditional culture by giving recognition to traditional craftsmanship, to nurture traditional craft artists, to provide qualifications and degrees through the validation of what is learned and experienced at the workplaces, to implement VPL for adult learners' admission to college, and to develop the LLAS for a comprehensive learning record and accreditation of each individual learner.



The implementation of VPL is expected to be widespread in Korea in the future. Several tasks especially stand out among the prerequisites for a stable and sound development of VPL. These include nurturing VPL experts, developing a private institution responsible for implementing the validation of prior learning in various fields, properly affiliating the national competency standards (NCS) with the national qualification framework (NQF) and VPL, and expanding VPL-related policy development and research. Once these tasks are successfully performed, VPL can develop to an extent that it will play a social function like academic diplomas and degrees have done so far. Human civilization is on the way to transition from the school-based society to the learning-oriented society.

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# The Experience of the Cités des Métiers in the French context of Validation of Prior Learning

# 13

Bernadette Thomas

## Introduction

When the '*Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience*' or '*VAE*' (in English: Validation of Prior Learning, or VPL) appeared in France in 2002, it was presented as a lever for change, which would hustle collective practices and give meaning to the concept of lifelong vocational training, whether the training was initial, continuing or integrating all that had been acquired through experience. In a socio-economic context of uncertainty, in which individuals were asked more and more to experience career transitions during their lives, VAE was considered an asset for securing career paths and career development.

The issue of VAE cannot be treated separately from the more general issue of "professional guidance". The Cités des Métiers (CDM), multi-partnership platforms are dedicated to guidance, catering to all categories of people, represent an ideal point of view to assess how individuals took possession of the VAE and how their guidance processes have been affected by the cultural change represented by VAE. The objective is to try to understand the reasons for the slow development of VAE in France to this day, despite the importance of the issues it captures for individuals and for the territories.

In the CDM, the issue of VAE is addressed from a vocational guidance perspective, in the following terms:

- how to meet the need for career counselling of all publics?
- how to put citizens at the heart of systems for vocational guidance throughout life?
- how to contribute to the de-compartmentalization of the labour market and of the systems of education and training?
- how to make it accessible to the largest number of people?

The CDM witnessed the birth of VAE and accompanied its development, approaching the public with a service offer reconfigured according to institutional developments and to the needs expressed by individuals. This is the CDM *modus operandi* and, to do this, they cooperate with certification bodies, accompanying bodies and other agencies involved in the VAE process, through original forms of association comprising different competencies.



Moreover, the CDM are focused on the needs of people. They are continuously, according to their founding principle, focused on innovation processes to meet the multiple needs of recognition or validation that may emerge throughout life training for people. While many researches focus on the evaluation of the VAE process, our approach is to provide a reversed look, deriving from the practical field and from the practical problems faced by professionals in the guidance support they provide to citizens.

With this broad perspective in mind, the main questions to be answered in this contribution are to what extent VAE responds to the explicit and implicit expectations of citizens in search of validation and how do the CDM-counsellors bring people toward VAE?

Answers are sought through examples of accompanying actions, implemented in the CDM of Paris, and in the basis of the experience gained in over 20 years in the international network of CDM. With this it is shown how the partners of a territory can help people with very different issues to mobilize their learning capacities for building their professional project. Also shown will be which obstacles need to be overcome in order to guide persons toward dynamic learning, either leading to a formal recognition of VAE type, or to other forms of validation. From this experience and from the lessons learned from the results of ten years of VAE, the objective is to identify the key factors that are worth paying attention to, and to draw some tips to remove obstacles to the development of training throughout life.

### **A short history of VAE and Cités des métiers**

The first CDM platform was born from within the Cité des sciences et de l'industrie<sup>29</sup> (National Science Museum) in Paris-La Villette in 1993, eight years after the institution in France of the accreditation of skills acquired in the workplace in 1985 (in French '*Validation d'Acquis Professionnels-VAP*') which allowed access to different levels of Higher education (decree n° 85-906 du 23 august 1985). The VAP was further modified in 1992, as work experience could be now validated as a learning environment.

Since their origin and in particular after the Law on social modernisation of January 2002<sup>30</sup>, the CDM maintained a close relationship with the institutional context of VAE, supporting its implementation through a range of services focused on citizen's needs<sup>31</sup>.

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29 In January 2011, the Cité des sciences et de l'industrie became a part of a larger public body called "Universcience"

30 Law of social modernization (*in French Loi de modernisation sociale*), no 2002-73 of the 17th January 2002 and its Decree no 2002-590 of the 24th April 2002 organising VAE in higher education establishments, and Decree 2002-615 of the 26th April 2002 for all professional certification

31 See also, Bénédicte Halba's article « Supporting migrants in the process of Validation of Prior Learning (VPL)- a French perspective » in the Acts of this 1st VPL Biennale



The Cité des Métiers (CDM) is an open-access resource centre for information, counselling and guidance in all matters related to the improvement of professional life and skills. It provides documentation and counselling services, and offers also workshops, training modules or clubs through which users can exchange and learn from others (in the CDM of Paris, to give only an example, more than 4.000.000 users were received since its opening).

The CDM have been developed as a close partnership unit, gathering in the same physical location the main partners in careers guidance, professional integration, professional advancement, and business creation. Each CDM is governed by a "Cité des Métiers Charter" and by a standard agreement between partners. The challenge is to address the concrete concerns raised by people by fostering their independence and expanding their possibilities of choice.

An international and free of charges franchising framework has been developed by the Cité des sciences et de l'industrie to allow the dissemination of the CDM model; an international NGO "Network of CDM" originated in 2001 which is currently gathering 40 (forty) physical platforms CDM located in ten countries, mainly in Europe plus more than 50 associated centres (<http://www.reseaucitesdesmetiers.com/>).

When the CDM of Paris was established, in 1993, it had four "counseling poles" corresponding to the practical concerns of people. These poles, together, allowed to answer all the problems of working life: choose its orientation, find training, find a job, be informed about a skills assessment.

The introduction of the counseling pole "Be informed about a skills assessment", was the result of developments introduced by the adoption of the Skills Assessment in the professional agreement of 3 July 1991, that enables staff members to analyse their personal and professional skills in order to define a vocational project or establish a plan for vocational training. This creation was in balance with the aims of the CDM to enforce people's empowerment since it allows any staff member to express a project, to verify the possibilities of its achievement and to prepare necessary training actions to implement the strategy. Completed by the law establishing the VAP on 1992, ancestor of the current VAE, it brought the people a social and institutional recognition of their experience. The centers for skills assessment, experimented from 1986, were the natural partners to liven up this pole: inform the people and explain them the steps, help them to understand their needs and/or, if necessary, to confirm their commitment in a personal and vocational skills analysis, direct them to the centers for skills assessment, and different ways to realise such analysis due to their situation.

In a few years, taking into account the skills and motivations initiated more dynamic approaches to career management, where the individual held a central role as s/he became responsible for his approach, carrier and guarantor of his/her own potential. The name of this pole thus appeared increasingly restrictive, given the opportunities offered to people by the skills assessment. The pole, previously named "Be informed about a skills assessment" (« S'informer sur un bilan de compétences ») thus became in 1998 "Change your professional life" (« Changer sa vie professionnelle »).



The evolution of the concept continued however, with another change of the pole name following the 2002 law that opened new rights to validation but also pushed the regions to set up support systems to assist in its implementation. Indeed, many regions accompanied the law through the creation of relay points to offer consult about the VAE, called, in Ile-de-France, « antennes VAE » (VAE branches), whose objectives are to inform about the VAE process, and to provide advice and guidance. The counselors' mission, in these branches, is to analyse the relevance of the individual VAE project, to redirect - if necessary - to other approaches (job search, skills assessment, etc.), to help to choose among certification offers (regional and national), or even redirect the person to the related certifiers as well as to inform about the funding opportunities.

In Paris, it was natural for the CDM to become one of the first two branches, which led to add « valider ses acquis » ("validation of skills acquired") to the name of the pole. Moreover, with the VAE, the concept of career paths replaced the static view of suitability to the workplace, therefore the verb "to change" masks the fact that an evolution does not necessarily passes through a break. The CDM therefore completed the name of the consulting pole which becomes "Change your professional life, evolve, validate your achievements." (« Changer sa vie professionnelle, évoluer, valider ses acquis », CSVP-EVA).

Progressively, the partnership network developed, and new partners brought their skills to lead this pole of the CDM. Partners are: the National Employment Service (Agence Nationale Pour l'Emploi, nowadays Pôle Emploi), the Academic Delegation to the Achievements Validation (Délégation Académique à la Validation des Acquis –DAVA), an NGO of retired managers working in Human Resources functions (including Directors, Social partners, civil servants, ...) . The combination of counselors coming from so many different partners allowed to deliver a sharp custom-made advice to help people to estimate their strengths and weaknesses, to answer their questions on their experiences and to study their possibilities of training.

The CDM anticipated on the legislative developments by operationalizing the right to vocational guidance (Act of 24 November 2009) and the upcoming law on career transition consulting. This anticipation was obtained focusing on a broader conception of the functioning of the pole around help and advice in constructing a professional project for all audiences, regardless of their status, and the development of their autonomy to steer their own career choice.

In the interest of clarification and simplification for people, the various devices were grouped in an inclusive framework under the generic term of 'career transition consulting', providing a gateway to training.

The reform of the training sector, in December 2013, with the signing of the National Interprofessional Agreement (Accord National Interprofessionnel-ANI) made this a key element in the training policy.

Indeed, the agreement provides that any person may receive free of charge a consultancy on professional development to better identify his/her skills, to assist in



his/her orientation and the development of a career plan, "without multiplying solicitations to different service providers".

According to the Labour Code (Article L6314-3 in the Law of the 14th June 2013), every employee benefits from a professional development consultancy whose primary purpose is to improve skills. This support, implemented at the local level in the public service orientation (provided for in Article L. 6111-3), allows the clients:

- To be informed about the professional environment and business evolution in the territory;
- To better understand their skills, to enhance them and identify the skills useful to be acquired to promote their professional development;
- To identify jobs that match the skills that they have acquired;
- To be informed of the various devices that they can mobilize for a project for professional development.

Each employee is informed, including by his employer, about the possibility of using this support. The CDM as a whole can meet all aspects, beyond the issue addressed on the consulting pole CSVP-EVA, and thanks to the complementarity of the five poles and its multiple partners.

#### **VAE and users requests: feed-back about the CDM experience**

The CDM are very open places. Adults seeking advice come to a CDM with different issues: the desire to change their professional qualification or to grow professionally, the need to find a job, the desire to obtain a professional training. Counsellors are available to help them in their guidance path and to give them advice.

Some people clearly formulate their request for validation, but for most it is the exploration phase during the interview that favours the emerging of a request for the path validation. This can take different forms, which do not necessarily lead to a request for VAE. In these cases, individuals are redirected to the pole tips CSVP-EVA.

What are the explicit and implicit expectations of validation and how are they expressed? How does the intervention of the counsellor bring up the issue of validation? The results below come from the statistical analysis made in 2013 from data collected during interviews on the consultancy pole of the CDM, particularly concerned by the problem of VAE: the one related to professional development. If the issue of VAE didn't not appear directly in the request of people, it might have been the advisor who mentioned it in the course of the interview.

*Table: People consulting the pole CSVP-EVA in 2013*

<b>Purpose of the Consultancy</b>	
Reconversion	3%
Evolution	9,9%
VAE	84%*
Skills Assessment	4%
Formation	13,6%

\* VAE is the unique purpose of the interview for 84% of people concerned by VAE during the interview.



VAE relates to the request of a diploma, by recognition of a foreign degree or a request to acquire a new degree. Motivated by geographic mobility or by the added value a diploma represents in a job search, these requests are related to the qualification system and their links with employment referents. Therefore it is necessary to verify the possession of skills in relation to a standard profile, to identify the corresponding diploma and organization likely to validate the issue. Optional is to explore opportunities to acquire additional training that could lead to obtain the diploma requested. Half of the requests for VAE concern a diploma issued by the Ministry of National Education; slightly more than a quarter relates to a university degree; 12.6% relates to the health and social sector whose diplomas are issued by the Ministry of Health. Only 4.8% of people interested in VAE is still in a training process. Sometimes people come for another request (retraining, assessment, professional development ...) and it is the advisor who directs them to VAE.

Often the validation request is not made or is not so clear; people come to learn about VAE before having already decided to commit to it. Among the interviews focused on the VAE, either at the initiative of the person or at the suggestion of counsellor, for 6.7% the issue of VAE fits in a reconversion problem (8.1% among men and 5.8% among women) or, for 3.7%, professional development. The issue of VAE is related to a process of skills assessment in only 1.9% of cases and involves only 4% of people concerned by a skills assessment.

Finally, 84% of the interviews focused on the VAE, the interest of persons originated by other motivations, the degree is sought as a step in a journey. In general, the CDM consultants are unanimous in saying that what appears in the interviews, a huge need to talk about themselves with an underlying request for recognition and valorisation through the narrative. In the search for the particular social object, people do not seek the degree itself but rather what it means or promises. Validation may be an answer to this implicit need for recognition but it is not sufficient for the vast majority. These findings are corroborated by studies recently conducted<sup>32</sup>.

### **Validation offered by the CDM**

In 2013, the CDM of Paris received 18.705 people for counselling interviews. In particular, the CSVP-EVA pole and pole devoted to training respectively received 4.128 and 4.890 people. These two consulting share the formulation of a request for assistance in building a strategy and/or in validating a career - or training - in a professional path. For the pole CSVP-EVA, 65% of people meet with a counsellor on their own initiative; less for the 'Training' pole with 41% of those received sent by the national employment agency or a support or training agency. These figures, related to the number of interviews addressing the VAE, measure the extent of the expectations of validation of adults seeking advice.

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32 Formation et Emploi N° 122.



How to respond to their expectations, and how to make compatible the logic of autonomy associated with guidance throughout life with the logic of prescription, constitutive of the public employment service, and with the validation project expected from the counsellor, is the daily challenge that advisors face. In the spirit of the Charter of the CDM, they must turn the users into actors of their professional life, that is to say independent in the construction of their professional project. This is to help them develop their empowerment and take ownership of the approaches allowing them to make choices; so to sat answering in a personalizing way to their needs.

The act of guidance crosses several dimensions that the counsellor must take into account during the interview: the aspirations of the people, the capacity of people in the labour market, the provision of training, external constraints. Thus, it is first by listening and through interaction and dialogue that the CDM advisor will let the person place his life story and express his/her expectations in all their complexity.

The narrative acts at the same time on the level of consciousness of the narrator, and it allows the counsellor to explore formal knowledge, non-formal and informal contents in the path of training and the experience that can be translated and valued in terms of employability and elements to be included in the resume.

After understanding the meaning that the person attaches to the interview and have him/her validate the reformulation of the request, the advisor will, in a second step, explore the possible ways to make creditworthy his/her skills on the labour market, enrich the curriculum vitae and improve the employability, to take a new step in his career, or to respond to personal reasons of enrichment or valorisation.

Whatever the nature of the validation sought, the socialization of the self-narrative is a must. This reflection of the person's experience is a prerequisite to allow an issue of personal training, or professional development emerges. The reflexive return that the narrative generates will help transform the experience through awareness and problematisation.

The interaction with the counsellor helps the person to find a meaning in his/her own path, to become aware of its wealth, to have a new value through the neutral look brought by the counsellor to the situation described by the person.

The resulting development of self-confidence and self-esteem permit, according to well-known mechanisms to initiate a movement of incentive to act that favours autonomy. As an explicit or implicit expression of the validation request addressed to the advisor, the narrative has the result to favour learning in three ways:

1. Helping to give meaning and coherence to know where to go: "To understand and be understood, the human being tells his life. At all times and in all cultures, giving a shape to its live through an oral or written narrative is a process of gathering, of ensuring consistency and meaning of different elements. This putting together what constitutes us, seems to be an inextricable operation mixing gaining awareness and making sense of self "(P. Galvani, 1999).
2. Influencing the motivation and self-efficacy when the person becomes aware of



its value and revitalizes him/herself to be better able to act (self-efficacy - Bandura, 1986, 1997). Identifying the blocks to success and opening the choices of occupations / professions or other possible paths, the counsellor validates the individual potential which reinforces his self-efficacy.

3. Helping formalizing the skills. Through the questions asked by the counsellor in order to better precise the narrative, s/he contributes to the learning of reflexivity, and can go up to propose the use of tools and/or to acquire methodologies to learn how to position him/herself (Schön, 1994).

The interaction is essential in this approach consisting of "the act of taking counsel" (Lhotelier, 1997), by creating a dialogue where the thoughts of the other, the methodical and plural research of the meaning of a problematic situation and the building of an active and creative process prevail, rather than "the act of giving counsel" as occurs in structures operating on a top-down mode where the counselling interview is subject to obligations of result. "Taking" counsel allows the emergence of the multi-facets of the validation demand during the interview.

Listening to these "narratives of the self" without judgement and without a priori, in a caring environment is doubly beneficial, first for the well-being of people and then to the objectives for the development of lifelong learning.

Although the validation of the project does not lead for the majority to the exploration of a VAE process, people voluntarily put themselves in a posture of learning through research validation, which can be as well the recognition of professional identity, the valuing of a path or the validity of a choice.

By encouraging them to describe their activities, experiences and their skills, this constitutes a first step towards their recognition by themselves and by others, which is important especially for vulnerable people, even more if they are not recognized by society. In addition to increased personal well-being, it allows developing the self-efficacy to remove blockages to success and access to more "formal" validations.

Overall people express their satisfaction of operating mode locations such as CDM where they feel confident. The periodic satisfaction surveys conducted at the CDM of Paris by an independent body show that the quality of listening to their advisors is well appreciated.

#### *How the CDM deals with other actors to support people in the divers path*

Individual counselling activities conducted in the CDM revealed, through the issue of professional project, the diverse expectations of personal and professional validation; they also analysed the difficulties of access to formal recognition through the VAE. To complete their service offer and in the same spirit of encouraging the autonomy of individuals, the CDM have therefore implemented workshops, sometimes training modules to assist people in their individual approach to their validation experience, acting closer to their needs, whether they are seeking a degree or other certification, exploring their skills or support to the person revitalization.



As for the animation of poles of advice, the CDM rely on a broad partnership partnering with stakeholders representing structures relevant to target audiences. The proposed collective activities are aimed at individuals, but where appropriate, some activities can be organized to accompany the steps of collective VAE driven by employers.

### **The VAE process**

The law of February 2002 created the National Directory of Professional Certifications (RNCP) that records diplomas, titles or certificates issued on behalf of the state and created after review of consultative bodies involving representative organizations of employers and employees. A National Committee of Professional Certification (Commission Nationale de Certification Professionnelle, CNCP) is responsible for updating it and for ensuring "the renewal and adaptation of diplomas and degrees to the evolution of the qualifications and of the work organization." The diplomas or degrees recorded in the RNCP must be accessible under the VAE. (Article 6 of Decree 2002-616).

Every candidate for the VAE has a long way to go from experience to certification. They must first identify the qualification to which they are entitled and check that their experience matches to the certification directory which provides guidance on the certification components, describes the activities of each job, function or employment aimed at by the certification, as well as the skills, abilities and knowledge required by the applicant for carrying out these activities.

S/He will then fill out an application for admission (Booklet 1) which comprises a collection of administrative documents to verify the compliance with the conditions of eligibility set by the law (registration of the desired certification to the National Directory of Professional Certifications, years of experience in correspondence with the content of the certification directory).

If the application to obtain a VAE is eligible, the applicant must complete Booklet 2, which describes very precisely and with supporting evidence the activities and tasks performed in connection with the degree sought, the method used, the activities and tasks performed, the transferability to other work situations, the degree of autonomy and responsibility.

The candidate is invited to offer a critical reflection on its experience and the analysis of his/her skills. S/He then faces a jury that evaluates and compares his/her experience with the skills, abilities and knowledge expected from a person who holds the diploma.

The information provided for writing 'booklet 1', with the creation of relay points for VAE, as decided by the legislator, and the accompanying devices introduced for writing booklet 2, does not appear sufficient or adapted to all public to allow the initiation of the process and the success of the VAE process.

### **Examples of cooperation facing the certification requests**

Besides the cumbersome nature of the VAE process, requiring a long-term commitment, one of the main obstacles to the utilisation of VAE is, despite all the information, the ignorance of the device and of the support that can be mobilized. In fact, people find it



difficult to identify the importance that VAE may have regarding their situation and their problems.

To overcome these obstacles, the CDM, with their internal partners and external partners, saw the need to provide local services that provide transparency of the VAE process:

- as an approach repositioning the VAE within a more general approach to guidance throughout life,
- as the opportunity to receive personalized advice and a plurality of perspectives from professionals involved at different stages of the process (training advisor, counsellor of the academic delegation at the validation of acquired skills assessment advisor, Human Resources Director...),
- by expressing the neutrality of the place, which implies that counsellors are not promoting VAE if it is not an appropriate response to the person, unlike organisms that merely verify the technical validity,
- by exploring possibilities of alternative validation if the certification is not possible.

For some people, individual counselling in an open space is not sufficient or is not appropriate, for example for fear of a face-to-face meeting due to a lack of confidence. The CDM has therefore decided to offer people to participate in a collective awareness workshop about VAE enabling them to understand what VAE is and what it can or cannot offer, what are the steps to be taken, the costs and the certification bodies in connection with the professional experience of the participants. The workshop, which commits the person less than an interview, may be followed by a personal consultation to determine whether or not it is time for the person to start a certification process, to choose the degree to validate, or on the training (or additional training) to undergo to enrich the path. Driven by Pôle Emploi, the collective one-day workshops are offered each month at the Paris CDM.

The RESSORT Project (Ressources pour Sécuriser les Salariés dans leur Orientation et leurs Transitions, in English Resources for Securing Employees in their Orientation and Transitions) 2011-2013<sup>33</sup> presents a good example of the impact of such a information strategy. This project was based on an external partnership with an organization that supports employees' leaves under the CIF, the VAE or the skills assessment (Organisme Paritaire Collecteur Agréé au titre du Congé Individuel de Formation - OPACIF, in English: Approved Joint Organisation for Personal Training Leave). Through this partnership, the CDM offers a comprehensive program combining collective information sessions, individual interviews, workshops, clubs that allows employees and independent workers to find adequate resources to prepare for their transition. The workshops are facilitated by the project partners but also calls to external service

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33 European Social Fund (FSE) in Ile-de-France : Axis 1 - Regional Competitiveness and Employment Programme, sub-measure 123: ensuring development throughout life for vulnerable workers, especially in the SME / SMI.



providers exists, in view of getting their specific expertise in certain aspects of the accompaniment.

With this information strategy in mind, a broad partnership mobilizing - across the territory - the actors involved in employment and training has developed to prepare the output (training, VAE, qualification, development, employment, retraining). The success rate comes to 65% for those who participated in the workshop about VAE "All Admissibility" and 44% for participants in the workshop on VAE Admissibility in Personal care services.

In total, 17% (28% in 2012) of those who are engaged in a VAE process received their validation, and 43% (52% in 2012) have passed the stage of admissibility (drafting of Booklet 1). This shows the usefulness of support and the importance of tailored support. The effects on self-confidence and the improvement the level of qualification are also very positive.

*Table: Usefulness of the workshops on career*

"Since your participation in the workshop did you feel....?"

Confident in your professional future	<b>81%</b>
Permanently installed in the workplace	<b>63%</b>
In a precarious situation	<b>36%</b>
In a situation of failure	<b>15%</b>

"Would you say that your participation in this or these workshop (s) helped you to..."

Gain motivation for the next steps and your future developments	<b>80%</b>
Gain confidence in you professionally	<b>72%</b>
Define and deepen your professional project	<b>67%</b>
Review your route	<b>65%</b>
Learn more about your rights as salaried	<b>39%</b>
Make contact with other participants / users of the Cité des métiers	<b>26%</b>
To discover other players in vocational training	<b>24%</b>

*Source: Survey for the Cité des Métiers of Paris – Survey Participants RESSORT (2013)*

Given these results and the wish of the participants, the experience of these workshops has been continued and also adapted to a new audience: the TREMPLIN - Transition vers des EMPlois mieux INsérés (transition to better integrated jobs) project, 2014-2016 is targeted to workers having a fixed term contract (Contrat à Durée Déterminée CDD) to enable them to know their rights to an individual training leave (Congé Individuel de Formation - CIF CDD), and be able to obtain it.

TREMPLIN offers an intensive program of workshops to learn word processing, computer or Internet, to learn how to develop one's own network on the internet or to argue a learning plan, and complement them (as for RESSORT) with two workshops four times a month on the admissibility of the VAE. These workshops are for small groups of 4 to 5 people.



The first workshop offers training on filling Booklet 1, the one that allows people to enter in VAE process independently from the validating organization (National Education and other validators). This step helps people understand what is expected of them. The workshop provides technical and moral support, but does not provide support at individual level.

The second workshop is intended for people who seek a degree or certification in the field of personal services; the proposed work helps in identifying their skills, and to describe their activity in relation to a referential of diploma which often seems theoretical, not detailed.

While guidance is provided for filling the booklet, for a more robust support, including the constitution and writing of Booklet 2, the relay is then passed to structures entitled to do so.

On the other side, if it appears that the degree sought by the person is not suitable, the relay is passed to the poles of the CDM (Training or CSVP-EVA) for an exploration of alternatives validations and / or a reflective work on the path to be followed.

### **Intervention in skills exploration: contribution of the collective dimension**

The request of a VAE is only the visible part of an iceberg. By focusing solely on the adequacy of the skills to the qualifications or job sought, we forget that the obstacles are mainly in the process of self-knowledge that begins with exploration skills and concerns a much wider audience.

Workshops such as "Identify your strengths and skills" to get to know oneself are offered by the CDM Paris to people who do not have a clearly identified professional project or do not know how to choose among their skills which ones they wish to develop in their next job.

This exploration is made collectively within a group that shares the same problem allows to make the exercise of distancing and reflexivity, while benefiting from a safe environment that provides the moral support of a group, and through the confrontation with the experience of others, this exercise allowing to update invisible or ignored skills. It may be proposed to complete the interview by an exploration, through assessment tools available in the self-documentation section of the CDM, and the result may be decrypted in a subsequent interview with a counsellor. Indeed, the exploration of skills is not a goal in itself but it is a springboard to build a project, as far as the person gives it a sense.

One of the reasons why the skills assessment (1991) did not produce the expected effects is partly due to failing the means to go through the process; the counsellors of the CSVP EVA-pole sometimes encounter people who received this assessment two or three times so far, but are still wondering what to do with the results of such assessments, are unable to make choices and remain in demand for assistance for the construction of a project for their future.

More complex advanced exploration tools such as the "Transference" software that allows a more accurate knowledge of one's own capabilities in relation to the context,



requires supervision by a counsellor trained in its use and support. Therefore 3-hours workshops are offered every week to help those interested in the implementation. At the end of the workshop, exploring the skills with a counsellor is one of the complementary means to identify new professional opportunities, to remove barriers to mobility in the labour market or to explore new geographic areas or, even, to evaluate other activity sectors, and validate a project.

More than others, seniors are faced with situations of prolonged unemployment leading them to isolation. In partnership with the Foundation for Action Against Exclusion (*Fondation Agir Contre les Exclusions - FACE*), the workshop "Valuing an offer of competence senior" enables job seekers over 45 years to explore their skills in line with job market needs and to offer them. The workshop allows them to feel less guilty and to take another look at their path, restoring their ability to act, without denying the real difficulties.

Other formulas to work on personal paths and to enhance the experience of target audiences through portfolios are also organized and tailored to the specific needs, such as the Club "Valuing its migratory journey: from the experience to the competence" proposed monthly for migrants looking for a job. The Club allows identifying and highlighting the informal experiences that are not recognized on the labour market (See Halba, 2014).

These examples show how a CDM can give rise to various validation requests starting from the personal path and the practical problems of people; by giving them the universe of possibilities and only when it is relevant, the CDM contributes to the identification of potential applicants for a qualifications process. These examples also show the need to respond to the diversity of situations that the term validation covers, with offers of advanced services that will enable the person to mature a project by linking them to his/her needs and mobilizing them at his/her pace.

### **Shaping services to enhance the dynamism through the personal narrative account**

More obstacles to be identified, which appear crucial in the VAE as in any other process of building a professional project, are related to the activation and then maintenance of the person's motivation.

That is why actions aimed at personal resilience are available not only in "paths" that are spread over several months, such as the projects RESSORT or TREMPLEIN, but are included also in proposals for collective activities, workshops or clubs. These proposals will allow everyone, thanks to a work on self-esteem, to restore one's own self-confidence and believe again in one's own power to act for change.

Workshops on self-imagining, the techniques of communication such as "learn to talk about his/her project", use various techniques, such as the theatrical ones. Through specific objectives, they allow to perform a work on self-esteem and self-confidence. There again, interaction with peers allows people to be trained and to transform themselves with the individualized help of professionals.



In other situations, when it is necessary to help the persons to be psychologically and objectively able to evaluate their project and to build a path for personal training, a much longer work is needed, which includes interaction with others which leads to an external reflexion on one's own position, collective exploration of solutions, within a caring environment, perceived as supportive.

In addition to counselling interviews in which the "self-narrative" play an emancipatory role, CDM developed "clubs" that allow a different type of socialization of self-narrative, because participants find themselves in a situation of self-peer education. These clubs are born from two observations:

1. Some vulnerable publics are in situations, for which official bodies do not have appropriate responses,
2. People develop skills in interaction with others, which allows them to transform, but they may also need reference points and to feel connected to others over time to maintain their motivation to act.

These clubs are small groups of people who meet in the CDM for regular monthly meetings among peers on a common theme. These meetings, regulated by a moderator, are an opportunity for everyone, in turn, to take stock of his/her position in an exchange socialized starting from personal narratives.

Through confrontation with other people in the same situation and the plurality of views, the club provides an awareness of the various constructions of reality. Everyone can speak face to others, take his/her place in the group, and find not only listening and counselling, but as well different points of view and means to act effectively.

As shown by investigations conducted in the LABOBS project<sup>34</sup>, the clubs allow the development of transversal skills, which identification and recognition by peers improve self-esteem and produce a self-reinforcement, acting as power generator. They exert a positive effect on the learning dynamics.

In some clubs, a portfolio allows to offer tools to the self-training activities and capitalise on the progresses. Dealing with diverse themes (Action Timeshare; African Dynamics; Artists and complementary labour; Chronic Diseases...) these clubs are usually driven by partnerships with associations of the territory.

### **Collective VAE**

The French government provides support to collective VAE projects co-financing various services offer with other partners, such as regional councils, accredited agencies for collection of funding for training (Organisme Paritaire Collecteur Agréé OPCA), and project developers (companies, associations, job centre...). The idea is to promote the mobilization of socio-economic actors and their involvement in utilisation of VAE as a tool for job and competency planning (Gestion Prévisionnelle des Emplois et des Compétences GPEC).

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34 LABObs Learning Ability Observatories, LLP Grundtvig 2007\_2009.



Some CDM not only organise activities to inform the public but also to act as intermediates between top down institutional approaches and bottom up approaches, focused on the paths and the needs of people.

For example, the CDM of St-Quentin (Picardie) is engaged in the promotion of VAE through the creation of a club, which is a place for sharing good practice and advice between graduates and people involved in a VAE, and in parallel organizing cooperation of stakeholders around a concerted action plan, taking into account the specificities of the territory. The plan includes: animation of meetings and discussions with VAE partners and stakeholders; organization of events and / or joint workshops; organization of exchange meetings with all joint bodies who dispose of training funds; meetings with social partners. Accompanying the process on the territory offers a better guarantee of greater success in the context of the provisional management of jobs and skills within the enterprises and on the territory.

### **Which lessons can be drawn from the experience of the CDM?**

If it is recognized that VAE represents a cultural revolution which opens new perspectives to the people, we have to admit that in spite of the importance of the challenges, there isn't yet the massive movement which we would have been expecting. How, through the experiences of the counselors, do we perceive in the CDM the barriers and facilitators with the VAE today? Which lessons can be drawn from the induced effects which we notice on organizations and people?

The VAE falls under an economic and social environment in which it can constitute an important tool so much for the reassurance of careers, as for job and competency planning (GPEC) at the level of territories with the collective VAE for the employees for instance. It knew in one decade a rise in notorious load increase. According to the report 2012 of the National Commission of Professional Certification (CNCP)<sup>35</sup> [1], 230.000 people benefited from it during the last ten years. On approximately 49,000 candidates who presented themselves in 2012 in front of a jury in order to obtain a public certification by the VAE, approximately 28.000 candidates obtained a certification (complete validation). The VAE developed much mainly in the health sector and social, which comes in second position behind state education. In addition, the number of certifications accessible to the VAE reached the 7.700, whose 2.872 certifications recorded on the request of training companies or professional branches what represents a considerable development potential, but with final the assessment is mitigated: success is proven but the development remains modest.

Many difficulties were identified (Merle 2008): discouragement, drop-out during the process, difficulties in describing and analyzing the activity, apprehending the adequacy between someone's experiences and the modules of a reference frame, providing the proofs, etc. Many authors referred to an intrinsic, major difficulty: the absence of a real

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35 Additional Vocational Training with the government bill of finance for 2014.



adequacy between the diversity and the wealth of the skills developed by the individuals in the course of their experiences and what was taken into account in the reference frames of training (Mayen, Métral & Tourmen 2010). Furthermore, a reluctance of the academic world still continues with regard to the knowledge of actions developed by personal experiences.

For Vincent Merle (2013), VAE however had advantages which had not been measured at the time of the adoption of the law: far from dissuading people, VAE rather encouraged them to engage in courses of formation; diplomas are not devalued as we fear they would have been, and there was no inflation of the wages because obtaining diplomas had no automatic repercussion on wage increase. Besides, it seems that in the economic context of crisis, insecurity of employment and the vulnerability of employees, VAE appeals to people by the fact that VAE is not just a simple legal device, but moreover that it brings to the fore the power of the act to learn, the place of the diplomas in the company, the social advancement and the organization of work (Pinte, 2011). These analyses are generally confirmed by the perception of VAE by the counselors of the CDM.

### **Evolution seen from the ground**

Few people engage in VAE and go up to the end of the process, on the one hand because it is expensive when its financing is not dealt with by an organization (personal leave for training or collective VAE for the employees) and on the other hand because of the long-term personal investment that it requires. To integrate a larger number of people into the process of VAE and to impel less formal approaches of formation throughout the life, a number of tracks were tested in the CDM.

As Skill Assessment (*Bilan de compétences*), VAE comes against its limits: it purely remains an approach extremely codified and adequationnist which classifies the skills in portfolios and other kind of passports of competences with an aim of connecting the profiles of the people with reference frames of trainings and jobs (RNCP, ROME Operational Repertoire of the Trades and Uses, Repertoires of basic post of the civil service...) in a logic of segmentation and fragmentation specific to the job market. What the CDM highlight beyond the requests for recognition of an experience or a career by VAE, is the idea of a release of a virtuous process (re-energization, professional evolution). In fact, VAE appears as a formal validation process down very excluding which reduces the person to certain aspects and goes against the stated objective of empowerment. To have a good VAE must also lead to a cooperation on the ground between players in charge of its implementation, as it takes a lot to converge complicated systems of actors : funders , local authorities, OPCA , job center, and with the implementation of the Regional Public Service of Orientation, all players of Reception, Orientation Information (AIO) . This convergence is much easier to achieve when already pooling their skills in places like the CDM. Unlike the top-down approaches, the CDM generate a different approach to VAE because they focus on the practical concerns and the interests of the person without the institutional challenge of



administering a device to a recipient: no requirement to result in a commitment in the VAE but only when it is relevant for the person.

In 2014, all the devices of reassurance of the personal career are being included in an integrative framework under the generic term 'Professional Evolution Counsel' (Conseil en Evolution Professionnelle). It will benefit from devices such as skills assessment or VAE without being bound up as it is the case today with on one side players jammed in closed devices and on other people who have needs that are more or less blurred and do not know how to direct. The organization of counselling evolves in the direction of convergence practiced since their origin in the CDM:

- *As a missing link between real expectations and institutional arrangements:* the legislator did not take into account the fact that good information is not enough to put people into action if we do not act in parallel on individual motivation. The counselling experience in CDM showed that VAE can meet real vocational guidance objectives, such as bounce, change careers, open rights to work, put skills in adequacy with a reference table of employment. It can be an actuating lever for change or to recognize professional value, or even base legitimacy. In other cases, the process is part of an open universe of possible research with a formative project that will give a new meaning to the career.

But expectations may be more vague and diverse. Some seek reassurance by confirming their course, or check their skills or to obtain recognition by peers. The limits of VAE in the recognition of transverse skills throw ambiguity about its failure to take into account such real expectations.

Failing to answer, one of the beneficial effects of VAE has been to allow the emergence of these expectations, highlight them and make visible the implicit demands of certification of skills held by individuals as well as recognition of non-formal and informal learning. It has opened up other opportunities for recognition or validation of the project, not formal or informal but nonetheless essential for people.

- *By filling in the need for personalized and contextualized advice:* in most cases, this is not information that people need but to have visibility on existing devices with regard to their personal circumstances and to the meaning they give to their approach. Only a personalized general advice can help them clarify their explicit or implicit expectations, problematize their situation by understanding their situation in its complexity and comprehensiveness to find consistency in their path. Some people are in a validation logic or merit, they are looking to obtain a degree and / or recognition to confirm a professional identity (hanging to a diploma deserved with regard to their job, remedy or repair an injustice); others engage in VAE to get a degree or recognition but more important to them is not so much the result that the process to be in a reflexive relation to their experience or in a dynamic learning. In the CDM, anonymity prevailing in counseling interviews is a lever to open the universe of potential and a force to deepen the reflexive work, paradoxically more over for those seeking a professional identity.

Then, to maintain the energy, reactivate the self-efficacy and develop the capacity to act, the relay must be passed to collective forms of support such as clubs.



Participants draw on the collective support points that restore confidence, while allowing a "focus on reality." Besides the effect of revitalizing these collective activities provide, the peer recognition provides moral support necessary to conduct a project over time

- *By developing a specific professionalism:* VAE has contributed to the emergence of a counselor's new profile. New elements in the way of considering the course are that assigns a value to the experience. Take the person in his/her singularity, analyze his/her experience to draw useful elements to the action requires to focus on the whole person and interact with them to help him/her discover his/herself. To be effective, the counselor must also take the time to get the person to consider his/her situation in the short term but also long term.

Make the connection between people's expectations and existing resources requires attention to the subjective dimension that crosses the interviews. This requires a particular professionalism as one that is built in the CDM over the initial experience of skills assessment then with the arrival of the VAE.

Listening carefully, know how to pull of the narrative account of oneself the son so that will cause a click and allow the person to build a professional project requires knowing how to act on personal springs. This is to give "meaning" ("sens" in french) in the three meanings of the term, the approach of the person when it is not immediately obvious:

- Meaning: inform about the device while contextualizing in relation to the real need of people
- Orientation: place the approach in the personal and professional route
- Sensitive dimension: know how to manage the emotion of the person (and his own) aroused by the narrative.
- Finally, it is also a question of helping the person to develop her/his autonomy and a question of knowing how to interact with other players or spend to them the relay to allow the person to continue autonomously *in its approach*.

## Conclusion

Defined in terms of career assurance by the legislature, VAE is an issue at individual level and as a tool for dialogue across the territory between branches, business, training, employee and professional organizations that jointly manage its funding at regional level. Looking back at 12 years of VAE and over 20 years of CDM-experience in guiding people throughout their life shows that focusing on the person rather than on devices, opportunities are expanding impact of validation, also other than VAE. Operating in this bottom-up approach, makes validation available to a greater number of people. Also the efficiency and the impact has been greater with the local services in meeting the real needs of people and reengineering the network of actors in promoting cooperation. Running on a multi partnership mode, the CDM are both places of referral for people to devices which will enable them to recognize their skills and a showcase for organizations that implement VAE to accompany people in the pursuit of their career or to link people to other devices.



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# An academic path to recognize experiential learning - the case of Padua University

# 14

Anna Serbati, Daniela Frison & Sabrina Maniero

## Introduction

The European Commission has published different documents about the increasing need to consider Higher Education at the centre of Innovation, job creation and employability and to strengthen the relationship between Education and Learning, Research and Business/Innovation, which are all considered key drivers of a society based on knowledge. So, the European Commission invites Universities to reconfigure their teaching and research agendas to seize the opportunities offered by new emerging lines of research (CEC, 2006) and by partnership and cooperation with the business world (CEC, 2009).

In this frame, the recognition of prior learning is an important way to connect higher educational institutions and organisational world in order to join the main objective of the new Europe 2020 Strategy: high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion. All higher educational institutions are invited to develop a system to assess and recognise all forms of prior learning experiences.

## The Italian context: national laws and best practices

In Italy there has been a rich debate for many years and a substantial agreement between all institutions and social actors on the importance to be able to validate learning outcomes acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts. However, there is not yet agreement to create a national system of validation and certification of competences acquired anyway.

The regulatory activity and experimentation of the Italian regions on the issues of validation and certification of competences between 2006 -2010 was very extensive and widespread. The experiences of the Italian regions differ from each other depending on the development of policies and practices. In some regions the strategy has been formalized and become law within a regional system validation and certification and specific experimentations were carried out. On the other hand, in most of the regions a number of projects and pilot experiences have been performed, but the formal law lacks. The University of Padua is located in the Veneto region, where several pilot projects in different areas of education and training and business sectors were initiated. Following the results of these projects it has been formulated the "Guidelines for the validation of competences acquired in non-formal and informal context" (DGR n. 2895 of 28/12/2012). It lacks a regional certification system.



At the national regulatory level, there has been a change with the law no. 92/2012 (implemented by decree n. 13th of January 2013) concerning the "reform of the labour market". It includes some provisions relating to the definition of a national system of competences certification and validation of non-formal and informal learning as key elements to ensure and realize lifelong learning in order to maintain the employability conditions of citizens. The implementing decree 13/2013 establishes the unitary framework for the competences certification, namely the National Directory of qualifications for education and training and professional qualifications.

In short, the most important elements of the law 92/2012 are as follows:

- the recognition of competences becomes an individual right;
- it is expected that the recognition of competences takes place by networking local actors, both public and private, without creating new national bodies;
- it indicates, among the guiding criteria and principles, the possibility to recognize non-formal and informal learning validated as university credits in relation to qualification of education and training and to the qualifications included in the national directory (Palumbo, Startari, 2013).

The Law 92 indicates a tool for the realization of lifelong learning systems in the "Territorial Networks", made by the actors of the systems of education, training and work. It proposes two major challenges to the University: the first concerns the ability to establish the prerequisites for the recognition and credits validation of competences, namely the ability to combine the learning outcome with competences and corresponding professional figures. The second one concerns the ability of the university to dialogue with the various stakeholders, both at national and local level, to build the competences indicators of the various figures developed (Palumbo, Startari, 2013).

At the university level lifelong learning exists, but it is weak and largely insufficient to meet the real social need. In the last years, many universities have developed a growing attention to the issue of lifelong learning. In 2011 it was formed the RUIAP - Italian University Network for Lifelong Learning -, whose members are 30 Italian universities. They are based on the principles of the European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning, which identifies the development and implementation of strategies for Lifelong Learning as a further institutional mission of universities. It is necessary to deal with the changes in our society, in collaboration with the actors of the different social and economic contexts.

The good practices for the promotion of lifelong learning and the validation and certification of competences in universities are still rare. That which is described in this paper represents a case.

### **The case of Padua University: the process of recognition**

In this national frame, the University of Padua, with the collaboration of Career and work placement Service, has conducted a project in 2011 within a wider project funded by the European Social Fund POR 2007-2013 Asse IV – Human Capital within '*System actions for the creation of operative tools to support the process of recognition, validation and certification of competences*'.



The project, entitled *MOIRC – Modello Operativo Integrato per il Riconoscimento e la Certificazione delle Competenze* (Integrated Operative Model for the Recognition and Certification of Competences) aimed at:

- promoting an active process of recognition of competences that adults have acquired in the workplace, vocational training courses or in other contexts in order to customise the educational path (gaining credits for entering study programmes).
- investigating the educational and guidance dimensions of the portfolio construction within a guided process for the development of awareness of the competences gained through reflection during and after the action.

In order to design and develop tools for the validation, accreditation and certification of skills within Padua University (Galliani, Zaggia, Serbati, 2011), the project involved 44 employed students enrolled in the following courses: Bachelor and Master degree in Continuing Education and Training; Bachelor in Disciplines of Psycho-Social Research; Bachelor in Economic and Government; Bachelor in Territorial Rearrangement and Environmental-Landscape Protection.

To have their experiential learning assessed and validated, the candidates had to possess and to demonstrate at least three-year work experience (full time/part time) in areas that are considered coherent to professional possibilities of job employment for graduates, and which are classified by ISTAT – Italian National Institute of Statistics.

After the candidates were selected, the preparatory *academic path* started. All participants received the support of *tutors/adviser* who guided the process. Because of the importance of their supporting role, the advisers, who came all from pedagogical/educational studies (master or doctoral level), were trained in advising, supporting, guiding and counselling by two professional experts in this field, who were also part of the Scientific Committee of the project.

The path was organized in three meetings to be (compulsory) attended:

- the first one to introduce the tools and the rules of procedure;
- the second one in progress to support the analysis of the candidate's experience and to get feedbacks on his portfolio;
- the final one to help comparisons between the different knowledge the candidate had acquired and those ones expected to have at the end of the course. This final meeting was also necessary to revise the new portfolio and to introduce the final interview with the Evaluation Board.

Moreover, a continuous support at distance was always available by mail or by phone.

The tool developed for the recognition of prior learning was the "*learning outcomes portfolio*", based on forms to help to identify knowledge, skills and competences – past and current – gained in past professional and educational experiences. Each portfolio contained evidence demonstrating the knowledge/skills for which people sought credits. The portfolio, the most used tool in European practices of validation and certification of competences (Cedefop, 2009), is a guided process to examine prior experiences in-depth in order to identify acquired knowledge and skills. At the same time, it is a product that can be evaluated to enable the partial or the total recognition of university credits

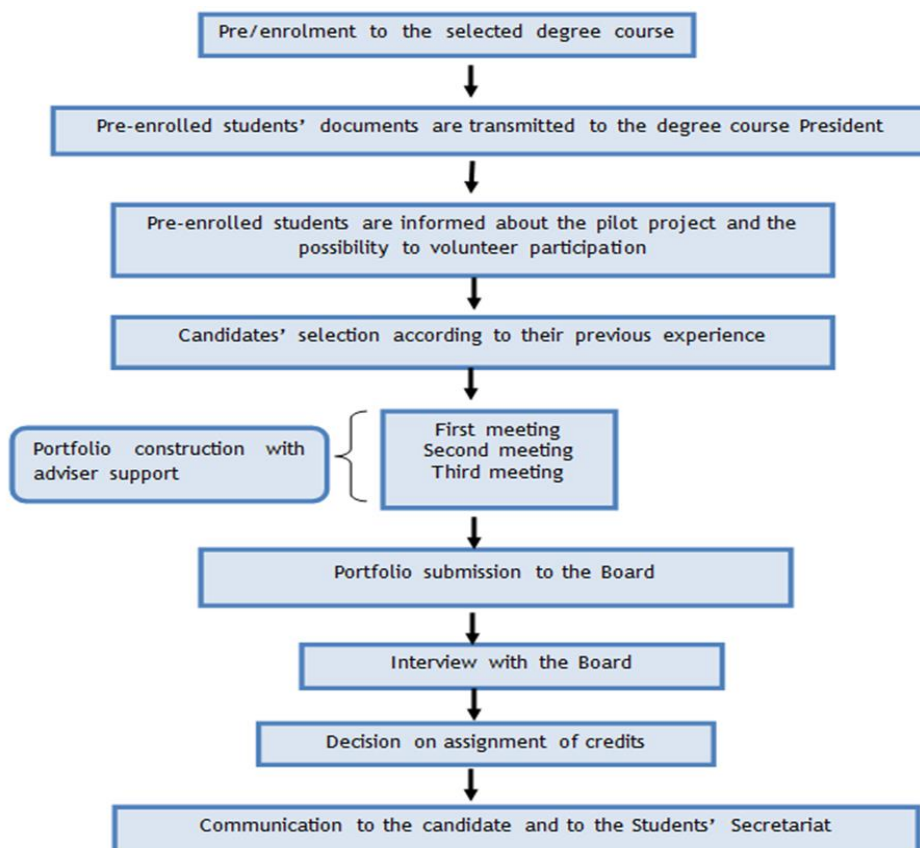


comparing the experiential knowledge achieved by the candidate with the learning outcomes required at the end of the formal course.

Once the portfolio of learning outcomes was completed, it was submitted to an Evaluation Board. The Boards (one for each involved degree course) were constituted by the President and two other experienced lecturers of the specific degree course, who had the role to evaluate the final portfolio and to propose credit exemption for the subjects in which the candidate could demonstrate his knowledge.

After the interview with the candidate, the Board assessed both the portfolio and the interview, so that to attribute the credits in a definite way. Immediately after, the candidate and the Students' Office were officially informed of the total amount of credits (in writing). The credits recognized by the Boards by resolution are valid for five years but only for the degree course the students were pre-enrolled.

The process of recognition is described below (figure 1).



*Figure 1. The process of portfolio construction*



In the table below (figure 2), the whole structure of portfolio sheets is presented, including some European tools such as CV Europass and European Language Portfolio.

1	Personal data
2	Summary of my path
3	My professional and educational path
4	My educational path (formal), summary of thesis, left or interrupted studies, formative path (informal, non-formal, e.g. courses at work, voyages, lectures...)
5	My professional path (professional experience)
6	My extra-professional path (sport, hobbies, charity work...)
7	European Languages Portfolio
8	Summary of knowledge, skills and competences acquired by professional and extra-professional experiences
9	From learning to competences in use
10	Scheme of self-evaluation about learning outcomes of the Course
11	Curriculum Vitae Europass
10	Scheme of self-evaluation about learning outcomes of the Course
12	Records of documents (highlights)

Figure 2. Learning outcomes portfolio sheets

The pilot project had much impact since all working students had some academic credits recognised by the Students' office, after the Board evaluation. The lowest number of credits assigned for experiential knowledge was 10 (informal education), and the highest 37. For other training activities documented (non-formal education) credits up to a maximum of 60 CFU were assigned.

### Research methods.

Evaluation criteria and indicators were established before the process while the related tools were built in order to monitor it *ex ante*, *in itinere* and *ex post* by means of:

- › Personal data form
- › Administrative documents (ESF - Regione del Veneto)
- › Pre and post questionnaires identifying prior knowledge related to the process of recognition and tools used, the perceived effectiveness of the process and the initial expectations and results
- › *In itinere* questionnaires (at the end of each portfolio form) and time schedule of the portfolio writing process
- › Adviser reflective-diary
- › Periodic meeting of advisers
- › Supervision of the final products: the learning outcomes portfolios
- › Final discussion in teamwork about the all process
- › Special form for recognized credits made by the assessment board to be sent to Student Secretariat.



Precisely, adult students filled pre and post questionnaires and have been involved in follow up interviews. Moreover, the research group also interviewed the teachers and the advisers who evaluated and supported participants.

Furthermore, the 12 advisers who supported the students were required to advise and support the process and to write a *reflective diary* outlining events and needs.

### Research findings

The research project identified findings and impacts on: academic path, professional context, learning strategies (Serbati, 2013).

#### Findings on *academic path*:

- › *New connections among companies and universities*: recognition of prior learning constitutes one of the possible answers to the development and implementation of a strategy for Lifelong Learning as a further institutional mission of university.
- › In the shared choice of the language (mediated by the adviser guidance) it is possible to find an *appropriate mediation* between the individual's originality and experience and the need to get closer to the terms and the academic requests, creating a dialogue between formal and informal learning.
- › *Motivation for continuing professional development* and lifelong learning also through academic paths: credits recognition may give adults confidence on their skills and therefore motivation to continue their educational career.
- › *New roles* (adviser) and tools (portfolio, learning journals) to support reflection on previous learning and to develop innovative educational methods to enhance self-directed learning.

#### Findings on *professional context*:

- › Identification of life *thread* and (professional) identity (Illeris et al.2009)
- › *Attitude to set problems in complex situations* in job activities (through analysis and reflection): to learn a reflective exercise and to set problems supply a critical approach and problem solving methods that can be practised in all future situations the adults will have to face as students or as professionals.
- › Clarify choices so as to *enhance the ability to decide*: potentially, the activity of a portfolio, whoever could read it, is timeless and can grant its "owner" to be self-confident in the choices he will make and in his decision making, being clear what his competences are. The balance and union between the informative function and the certifying one will give the adults the possibility to be aware of the choices they make and the courses they decide for. In this way, their past experiences are greatly considered and dissatisfactions or giving up are, as far as possible, avoided.
- › Possibility to *certify competences for work* (internal training), not only to re-entry in educational programmes: even if this aspect does not concern the present paper, we would like to remember that the certification is an issue of debate among the representatives of workers and employers in order to find a job or to improve any professional position. Certification can become a basic element in



the active policies of employment, in ruling apprenticeships, in accrediting institutions – including the competences of the people involved in these processes. The use of rigorous and scientific tools should be supported by commitments, political and institutional actions to get concrete and effective professional and academic results.

#### Findings on *learning strategies*:

- › Biographical tools (such as the portfolio) can decipher *new meanings that are latent in individual life* and can get new useful resources for the return to action (Alheit, 1995, 2000, 2009). Quoting Alheit, in every personal story there is a great part of “no-real life”, that is to say of unexpressed possibilities, missed opportunities and choices that come to light during these moments of reflection and individual meditation. That is a way to discover biographies that can modify past patterns and schemes. This hidden aspect sometimes turns out to be a real resource for the adult to change his professional position or to re-think about his vocational training. Besides, it is the result of a process of self-analysis and awareness that gives the adult the possibility to have “a new general view”, based on common mental habitus and new keys of reading (Alheit, 2009).
- › Portfolio sheets and dialogue with adviser facilitate access to *coherence in different meanings* in everyday life (formal, informal contexts). By the means of the narrative process this total and general vision comes to light, and this varied dimension and coherence on the educational and professional story of people helps to find out the “threads” which mark their biography (Alheit, 2009). According to Surian’s writings (2011) the biographical practice is firstly based on the aim of making present life meaningful, tracking down the past and looking to the future. This practice basically encourages the narrator to be the first actor of his own life, directly creating links and meanings between his past experiences, giving them active coherence and logic (Surian, 2011).
- › To learn a *transformative reflective continuous* exercise (Mezirow, 2004).

The ‘*advisers diaries*’ content analysis was based on the categories of *competence* identified by Salini, Ghisla & Bonini (2010). The required advisers’ competences can be divided in two areas: one regarding *relational* and the other on *methodological aspects*. In the first one, the importance of creating a relationship of trust emerged enabling students to have an active role in becoming more aware and in the ability to plan without being judged or steered, thereby avoiding assistance or dependent behaviour. The centrality of the subjectivity of the adult is the real sense of the process in order to have real and reliable positive changes: the stimulus to reflect, to tell stories, to develop meta-competences leading to self-analysis and identification of what the individual knows and can do. This, on the one hand, gives the Board the possibility to recognise courses by assigning credits and, on the other hand it gives the student a realistic idea of himself, in order to choose learning strategies, academic and professional pathways that are really relevant and satisfying for his own future (Serbati, Galliani, 2013).



Connected to the relational competences, there are interesting suggestions also linked to the methodological competences from the advisers' point of view. These categories have been interpreted again by using those ones defined in the above mentioned Swiss research of Salini, Ghisla & Bonini (2010).

The adviser should be able to organize himself to dedicate time to the candidates, dealing with face-to-face and on line meetings, during which he offers a support to fill sheets and a support to correct use of terms. The adviser should be able to guide – that is to say to give the candidate some references and instructions on the possible problems he could eventually have to deal with. He also has to understand the way the candidate has built his learning and he has to help him to formally describe his experience. Moreover, the adviser should be able to listen to the candidate, to talk to him and to help him to reorganise ideas- supporting him to elaborate his experiences and to illustrate his portfolio to the Board. Opposite, the guide is not asked to assess the candidate, considering that this is only the Board's task. Then, the adviser must not interfere on the candidate's presentation, being the last one the only interpreter and "owner" of the experiences he desires to declare and make the Board known about (Adjas S., 2006). Finally, the adviser must be fairly "kind" and curious to allow the candidate to tell his story, to have power on his learning path, to reflect on his experience and to give a shape and an identity to the knowledge he has acquired (Veilhan A., 2004).

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

A long term implication of this project could be the possibility to build a *University lifelong learning centre* with services and processes to recognise prior experiential learning, to develop more flexible courses and to create partnerships with professional orders and associations. This may be an answer to the workers' needs and improving the dialogue between higher education and workplace, professional learning and academic learning, theory and practice.

The RUIAP (Rete Universitaria Italiana per l'Apprendimento Permanente – Italian University Network for Lifelong Learning) is organizing the realization of a training course in "Expert in assisting the recognition of competences and validation of prior learning" to be activated by universities or their groups at a regional or sub-regional level. The aim is to *train a professional figure able to support people* in rebuilding their experiential knowledge and to manage practices of recognition and validation of prior learning in non-formal and informal contexts.

During the academic year 2014/2015 the implementation of a training course MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses) is expected. It will be provided for free and will consist of 20 credits - 5 teaching units of 4 CFU - concerning:

1. European and national policies and practices of recognition and validation of experiential learning;
2. adult education according to lifelong learning and approaches to competences;



3. principles, methods and techniques of guidance, support and individual and group mediation;
4. methods and tools for the identification and formalization of experiential learning (portfolio, competences assessment, dossier, citizen's training booklet);
5. organization and management of the recognition path, validation and certification of competences in different contexts (school, university, professional training, adult education).

The challenges for the University in this field seem to concern: the ability to establish the prerequisites for the recognition of credits and the validation of competences, namely the ability to combine the learning outcomes with competences and corresponding professional figures; the ability of the university to organize the dialogue with the various stakeholders, both at national and at local level.

In this frame, Italian Universities, and Padua University too, face the challenge to create a *culture of recognition of prior experiential learning* with the support of the academic network RUIAP which supplies them with guidelines for the development of appropriate services, in order to improve the dialogue between higher education and the workplace, between professional learning and academic learning, and between theory and practice.

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# The Quality Code on Validation of Prior Learning in The Netherlands: past, present and near future

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# 15

Patrick Leushuis

Validation of prior learning (VPL) started attracting serious attention from policy makers at national level in the Netherlands in the 1990's. In this decade the debate more and more focused on the need to connect VPL with the actual needs of the labour market. The work of a number of successive commissions paved the way for VPL, particularly in terms of the focus on the learning individual and the concept of competencies. The most influential Commission was that of Professor Wijnen that worked on questions relating to better utilization of learning processes both in and out of school, and on strengthening the impact of on-the-job learning on the labour market. The most significant conclusion in the commission's report (Wijnen 1994) was that a system recognizing non-formal and informal acquired qualifications was feasible and needed. And so, the "EVK-concept" was born: 'the validation of qualifications acquired elsewhere', the premise being the official qualification or certification of educational tracks participated in previously (whether or not completed). The next step would be the validation of 'competencies'. In the meantime however, the government greeted the Wijnen-report with enthusiasm. EVK could make a useful contribution to matching the labour and education markets. The government would provide instruments for EVK, including development funding. Schools, job centres, companies and other parties picked up EVK and ran with it. But there was a lack of adequate support, and the initial enthusiasm ebbed.

After a brief lull, the government kicked things back into gear in 1998 with a national action programme on Lifelong learning:

*"The workplace needs to be used more as a place of learning. The experiences gained must be made visible as independently acquired competencies. The cabinet wishes to promote this by setting up a system by which knowledge acquired elsewhere (that is, outside of the educational system) can be tested and accredited".*

(Actieprogramma 1998)

This was an important step towards expanding on the EVK concept to the valuation of learning experiences acquired outside of the formal educational system. These experiences



gained in the workplace would be revealed, and then tested and accredited; with this, the K became a C (*competenties*, or competencies) and since then, the system has been referred to as *erkenning van verworven competencies* (EVC in Dutch, or VPL in English). The social partners also made an important contribution to this shift towards competency-based professional training. So, time had come for the implementation of all the ambitious plans.

### **The Glass is Half Full**

With the publication of *De Fles is Half Vol!* ("The glass is half full!") in 2000, a first step towards lifelong learning using VPL was taken. A national VPL working group formulated a broad vision on VPL and the implementation process. VPL had to bridge the gap between the education supply 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 competencies in a career context (Werkgroep EVC, 2001). To support this application of VPL and to learn from the existing practice, the government established the Knowledge Centre APL (*Kenniscentrum EVC*) in 2001. The Knowledge Centre's goal is, on the basis of collecting practical examples, to promote the use of VPL in the labour market and to take VPL to a higher qualitative level. It became clear that there were many situations in which VPL could be used and led towards a variety of effects, but did not automatically lead to the desired effects (Duvekot & Brouwer, 2004).

The development of validation procedures that followed was a bottom up process. Klarus (1998) found that this led to more experience with VPL, but not to a really widespread use and structural embedding of VPL. Thomas and Frietman (1998) advised to take measures enlarging the scope of VPL in the context of employability and lifelong learning.

A working group on VPL was installed, with representatives from the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, the Ministry of Education Culture and Science and representatives of employer organizations and trade unions. The working group published their report '*The glass is half full*' in 2000. VPL was positioned as an instrument for further (career) development of individuals and improvement of human capital management in organizations. It was advised to establish a national expertise center on VPL, to promote the use of VPL and support professional VPL practice. The national expertise center on VPL started in 2001, founded and funded by government.

From the early developments in the previous century the perspective slowly changed. The focus shifted from transparency of outcomes of non-formal learning and connecting non-formal and formal learning to a focus on VPL in the context of employability, career development and lifelong learning.

The VPL practice started growing and the bottom up development ('*let a thousand flowers bloom and blossom*') led to a huge diversity in VPL practices, procedures and instruments used and big differences in quality. Society, employers and unions started



demanding for more clarity and common agreements on quality of VPL. And there was a demand for a more systematic promotion of VPL and lifelong learning.

### **National Quality Code on VPL**

In November 2006 a National Quality Code on VPL was established. The Quality Code was part of an agreement between government, social partners and umbrella organizations of educational institutes. In this agreement VPL was defined as an instrument for individual career development. VPL was to be used directly in the labour market (job applications, internal and external mobility) and in training and education (enrollment, obtaining exemptions, degrees and diplomas). Nationally recognized qualification standards were to be used as standards in VPL procedures. These could be both formal educational standards (VET and higher education) as well as non-formal standards from branches of industry. All standards in VET and higher education could 'automatically' be used by accredited VPL providers. For the use of non-formal standards these standards needed approval from the governing body on VPL.

In the agreement and the VPL Quality Code choices were made that seemed good and logical at that time. But some of these choices later turned out to have side effects that were not anticipated. VPL was positioned as a market activity and VPL procedures should be paid for by individual candidates and/or employers. VPL providers needed to be independent and VPL should not be integrated in educational programs, so individuals would not have to enroll in a program to do a VPL procedure. This way the threshold for participating in VPL would be as low as possible. And it was thought that it was wise to have independent VPL providers, because educational institutes have an interest in letting individual candidates enroll in longer educational tracks, to optimize revenues.

The aim of the quality code was to increase transparency and accessibility of VPL procedures and to enhance the effect of VPL, both on the labour market and in education. The quality code consisted of five subcodes containing criteria regarding (1) aims and objectives of the individual VPL candidate, (2) rights and information, (3) assessment instruments and assessment criteria, (4) quality of assessors and counselors and (5) quality assurance by VPL providers<sup>36</sup>.

A national system for accreditation of VPL standards, procedures and providers was established. VPL providers were visited and assessed by external audit organizations. They would conduct their assessment based on self-evaluation reports of VPL providers, in which the providers describe and proof how each of the criteria in the quality code is met, and on interviews with VPL practitioners involved in the organization of the VPL provider. After accreditation the VPL standards of the VPL provider would be registered in the national VPL register. Tax deductibility of the costs for VPL was introduced, limited to VPL standards in the national VPL register only. And only accredited VPL providers were allowed to use the official VPL quality mark in their communication and promotion

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36 An English version of the current Quality Code on VPL is in the appendix of this chapter.



activities. The national VPL register is online, so anyone can see which VPL provider offers what VPL procedures, for which qualification standards and with proven sufficient quality.

### **National expertise center on VPL**

The role of the national expertise center on VPL altered into supporting the implementation of the quality code and the quality focus in VPL practices. Their task was to provide information on VPL and the quality code and collect and disseminate examples of good VPL practices in education and in the labour market. The center started a VPL Academy providing training programs for VPL professionals about development of VPL procedures and instruments, VPL guidance and counseling and for VPL assessors. Later the center also started providing training programs for members of exam committees of educational institutes, to promote acceptance of Certificates of Experience (VPL reports) in exemption procedures and to support decision making by exam committees. And the national expertise center developed an online accessible VPL toolbox with handbooks, formats and guidelines (e.g. on how to write a Certificate of Experience) and competence profiles for VPL assessors and counselors.

### **Building a VPL infrastructure**

In 2005 the Dutch government started an interdepartmental Project Directorate Learning and Working. This Project Directorate stimulated the formation of regional (and some sector) partnerships between business organizations, education and training institutes and local and regional government organizations. These partnerships were subsidized (2006-2010) to realize ambitions on numbers of participants in VPL procedures and in work based learning programs. To receive the subsidies the partnerships had to develop plans based on analysis of labour market needs and agreements on how to realize the quantitative ambitions. The Project Directorate also gave separate subsidies to higher education institutes (2007-2011), for development of VPL procedures and instruments, training of assessors and counselors and promotion of VPL, provided that these VPL procedures would be positioned external to the organization of the educational programs.

Since 2010 regional learning and working offices were established and subsidized, related to the regional partnerships. In these learning and working offices the partners continued their cooperation, provided (virtual and physical) information to individuals on VPL, training and education and career counseling and continued the active approach of employers to get them to invest in VPL, training and education for their employees. About 30 of these offices currently still exist and operate.

### **Promotion of VPL**

The Project Directorate coordinated national promotion of VPL. Booklets, flyers, posters etc. were developed and made available in an open format to the regional and sector partnerships for their promotion activities. A portal and a website were developed and



numerous videos with VPL testimonials<sup>37</sup> by individual participants and employers were produced and published. An animation clip<sup>38</sup> was made, to explain the concept of validation and the steps in VPL procedures. A national promotion campaign was launched using television<sup>39</sup>, radio and internet. Case studies on good VPL practices in branches of industry were done, resulting in reports that were disseminated to stimulate integration of VPL in collective labour agreements and sector development plans.

## Results

As a result of all activities the number of VPL participants grew rapidly from 2007 to 2010. In 2011 the number of VPL participants dropped:

	Number of VPL participants
<b>2007</b>	9,900
<b>2008</b>	12,500
<b>2009</b>	15,700
<b>2010</b>	22,000
<b>2011</b>	17,700

*Sources: EVC gemeten, 2011; EVC gemeten, actualisatie 2011-2012, 2012.*

By 2010 there were about 120 VPL providers in the country. The inventories by Ecorys (2011, 2012) showed that most VPL participants took part in VPL procedures related to formal educational qualification standards in VET (EQF levels 2, 3 and 4). And it showed that there was a small but increasing share of VPL participants in procedures using non-formal standards with qualifications established by branches of industry.

After 2011 no new investigation of the number of VPL participants was conducted, but the general impression was that numbers of VPL participants dropped after the subsidized projects and national promotion campaigns ended, possibly also due to the financial and economic situation.

## Evaluation, experiences and challenges

Evaluations in VPL practice showed that VPL was mostly used as an educational instrument: to enroll in educational programs, to obtain exemptions and to get diplomas. The use of VPL directly on the labour market (for career development, internal and external mobility) remained limited. A research on the effects of VPL for individuals and organizations (Stoel and Wentzel, 2011) showed that VPL did have an effect on changes in tasks, mobility and income development, but only for those who obtained a formal diploma after finishing their VPL procedure. This indicates that employers still value and trust formal diplomas more than the description of the qualities of individuals as assessed in VPL procedures and reported in Certificates of Experience.

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37 VPL-testimonials: [Video.ervaringscertificaat.nl](http://Video.ervaringscertificaat.nl)

38 Animation clip on VPL: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_BZWYh52Rck&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_BZWYh52Rck&feature=related)

39 TV-promotion clip on VPL: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCf4udF\\_EuA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCf4udF_EuA)



Because of the nature of the quality code, the accreditation system and the work of the national expertise center on VPL the focus in VPL practice was on summative assessment related to national qualification standards and on quality assurance. Compared to the time when ‘a thousand flowers were blooming and blossoming’ there was less attention for the formative use of validation and alternative forms of making development and qualities of individuals transparent.

Stoel and Wenzel (2011) concluded that there were many missed opportunities in VPL practice and recommended:

- to reinforce the use of VPL on the labour market, by integration of VPL in HRM policy and practice and follow up on VPL procedures with professional career development activities;
- to reinforce the formative use of VPL, also using ‘alternative’ methods and instruments.

Evaluation showed that there were problems in the acceptance of Certificates of Experience. Exam committees of educational institutes were reluctant to give credits or exemptions based on these VPL reports. In some cases this meant that exam committees ordered a new assessment of the VPL portfolio of the individual.

An investigation by the Inspection of Education on the quality and transparency of decision making by exam committees showed that there was a lot of room for improvement in accounting for this decision making. The Inspection found that the Certificates of Experience that the exam committees received, were often not according to the quality standards.

A lot of educational institutes that had separate provision of VPL procedures decided to stop offering VPL, due to the high costs of VPL accreditation and low numbers of VPL participants per VPL standard and because there were alternatives. They decided to use VPL instruments in intake assessments and exemption procedures instead and no longer be bothered by the VPL Quality Code and (the costs for) accreditation of their VPL standards and procedures.

### **Towards a dual approach in VPL**

Based on these experiences and evaluation, employer organizations, trade unions and the government decided in 2013 to change the Dutch strategy for the VPL system. The new strategy is related to the government’s drive to move towards a ‘participation society’ in which all stakeholders take ownership and responsibility for their own role. It was decided to have a VPL system with a binary or dual approach. The new system will be implemented by 2016 and we are now working towards it, making arrangements for implementation.

The dual approach consists of two tracks:

1. VPL for direct use in the labour market (internal and external mobility);
2. VPL in formal education.



By having a separate track for VPL on the labour market, the use of a variety of methods and instruments (e.g. e-portfolio) and the utilisation of more non-formal standards as VPL standards can be stronger promoted. VPL procedures for those who want to use VPL directly on the labour market, for career development and mobility, are expected to benefit from supervision of labour market institutions, like sectorial employer organizations or social partners. It is thought that ownership and responsibility for integration of VPL in HRM policies and practices can be realized better this way, leading to a more fruitful practice of VPL in the labour market..

VPL procedures for those who want to obtain a diploma or degree in formal education will be integrated in the educational system. It is thought that by organizing VPL procedures closer to the exam committees in VET and HE, problems regarding the acceptance of the outcomes of VPL are supposed to be diminished. And it is thought that educational institutes will get more sense of urgency and experience the need to provide flexible learning opportunities, tailor made to the capabilities and needs of learners.

In VPL quality assurance the 'one size fits all' approach of the National VPL Quality Code will no longer be applied. The responsible organizations in the labour market will get opportunities to design tailor made, 'fit for purpose' quality assurance related to a variety of methods, instruments and standards used. Quality assurance regarding VPL in formal education will be embedded and become a part of the regular quality assurance system in education (VET and higher education).

To make sure the possibilities are optimized to link the world of work to the world of training and education, agreements will be made on the assessment of learning outcomes, on the way learning outcomes are described and structured and on how level descriptors are used.

## **Reflection**

Many years of development, promotion and collaboration have led to many good practices, insights and experiences regarding VPL in the Netherlands, but still VPL is not really widely accepted and fully integrated in both education and the labour market. A mind shift still needs to be made in the learning culture of the society in general and of educational institutes and (business) organizations more specifically. The value of non-formal and informal learning is underrated compared to the value and appreciation of formal educational learning and the acceptance of formal diplomas in society.

First of all we need to make sure there is more evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, on the value of non-formal and informal learning and the equivalence of its outcomes to outcomes of formal learning. We will need to invest in statistical data collection and analysis, for example on how people, participating in VPL, are doing, what their progress is in education or in their career and how they can be compared to other groups. We will have to make sure that results of scientific research on VPL is used by



policy makers in government, by organizations on the labour market and by educational institutes. And we will have to invest in raising awareness and development of a learning society in which individuals are empowered and take ownership and responsibility for their development and use of relevant instruments that are available and accessible. Stakeholder involvement and flexibility ('fit for purpose') are key factors in this process.

Moreover, in education we will have to make sure to use a consistent design, aligned with rules and regulations, steering mechanisms and quality assurance. If we really want to give individuals the opportunity to link and integrate formal, non-formal and informal learning in their lifelong learning, and if we want to make sure VPL really becomes an integral part of the educational system, the use of learning outcomes and 'curriculum independent' methods of assessment should be the central point of focus in each of the subsystems. As long as the (fixed) curriculum is the rule and the focal point in the design of the educational system we will not be able to fully realize the potential of VPL.

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## Appendix

### ***The Quality Code on Validation of Prior Learning (VPL), The Netherlands***

#### **Code 1. Objective**

*The objective of VPL is to make individual competencies transparent, valued and validated. Validation and Recognition of Prior Learning has an intrinsic value and contributes to employability. In most cases VPL leads to further professional career related personal development.*

- 1.1 The VPL provider designs its validation procedures to assess the competences of individuals against a national standard and to report the validation that is the result of the procedure in a transferable Certificate of Experience.
- 1.2 Training, education and graduation / obtaining degrees and diplomas are not part of VPL procedures.
- 1.3 The VPL provider is fully responsible for each VPL procedure for which Certificates of Experience are issued.

#### ***Explanation***

VPL providers are required to design validation procedures in such a way that it is ensured that an individual candidate receives a Certificate of Experience after finishing the procedure. With the Certificate of Experience the candidate should be able to provide evidence for his/her competences both in education and in the labour market. A validation procedure does not end with a diploma. Training and education are not part of a validation procedure. Training and education can be activities following up on the Certificate of Experience, if the candidate wishes to pursue education and a diploma or degree. Whether or not exemptions or credits can be obtained in an educational or training program is the responsibility of the exam committee of the educational institute involved.

#### **Code 2. Rights**

*VPL meets the needs of the individual. Rights, obligations and agreements are clearly stated.*

- 2.1 Information on VPL procedures is established and published, accessible to the public and contains at least a description of the elements and steps in the procedure, the methods used, an indication of the required investment of time and means, the maximum duration of the procedure, conditions for participation and the rights of the individual VPL candidate. The VPL candidate receives clear instructions and information about the value and possibilities for use of the Certificate of Experience.
- 2.2 The VPL providers makes sure all agreements with the individual VPL candidate are recorded in writing, including the required investment of time and means, the maximum duration of the VPL procedure, the standard(s)/qualification(s) to be used in the procedure and the objectives of the candidate. These agreements between



the individual candidate and the VPL provider are recorded before the start of the VPL procedure and the written agreements are signed by both parties.

- 2.3 The VPL provider offers every individual VPL candidate the opportunity to have a final interview with the VPL provider to evaluate the entire VPL procedure.
- 2.4 The VPL provider guarantees that every individual VPL candidate can make use of an adequate procedure for complaints, objections and appeals.
- 2.5 The VPL provider only reports the results of the VPL procedure to the individual candidate. Reports on findings and results are only given to third parties after explicit permission in writing is given by the individual candidate.
- 2.6 The VPL provider has the obligation to make sure the candidate can finish the VPL procedure in case the provider ceases to exist or finishes its VPL activities. Transfer to another VPL provider is a possibility.
- 2.7 In case the accreditation of the VPL standard of the provider is withdrawn or ends after the start of a VPL procedure by an individual, the VPL provider has to make sure the Certificate of Experience the candidate receives meets all requirements. The VPL provider has to record in writing this will be guaranteed.

#### *Explanation*

The VPL procedure should be entirely clear before the VPL candidate signs the agreement to participate in a VPL procedure. The VPL provider needs to be transparent, provide all relevant information and make sure the procedure can be finished with obtaining a Certificate of Experience, also in case the provider loses its accreditation. The VPL provider also has to make sure adequate procedures for complaints, objections and appeals are in place and the VPL candidate receives all relevant information to file a complaint, objection or appeal.

#### **Code 3. Assessment**

*VPL procedures are based on national qualification standards. The VPL provider uses reliable assessment instruments. Trust is a key issue. Trust is related to civil effect, well defined standards, clear information on the way assessments are executed and transparency in reasoning underlying conclusions in terms of results of assessment.*

- 3.1 Tasks, responsibilities and authorities of practitioners involved in the organisation of the VPL provider are recorded, known to all relevant parties and functional in VPL practice.
- 3.2 The national qualification standard used in the VPL procedure is a valid CREBO- or CROHO standard [VET or higher education standard] or a standard of a branche of industry that has been approved by the Stichting van de Arbeid [social partner organization – employers and unions] for use as a standard in VPL procedures.
- 3.3 In a VPL procedure all evidence brought in by the candidate is taken into consideration.
- 3.4 The evidence used in the VPL procedure meets the VRAAQ-criteria (variety, relevance, actuality, authenticity and quantity).
- 3.5 The instruments and assessment criteria used in a VPL procedure are matching and fitting the qualification standard used in the VPL procedure (content and level).



- 3.6 The VPL procedure and instruments are curriculum independent.
- 3.7 The assessment guarantees optimal transparency, reliability and independence.
- 3.8 The reasoning and considerations that is part of the assessment (like valuing evidence and choice of assessment instruments) are recorded and registered during the VPL procedure and remain available in the organization of the VPL provider for at least three years.
- 3.9 The VPL provider keeps copies of all relevant evidence of the candidate archived for at least three years, as far as the evidence contributed to the results of the assessment as described in the Certificate of Experience.
- 3.10 A VPL procedure results in a Certificate of Experience that at least contains: the objectives of the candidate, the national qualification standard used, the steps of the VPL procedure and the instruments used in these steps, the competences validated/recognized, a clear substantiation of the validation and a final conclusion that matches the objective of the candidate. The substantiation of the validation in the Certificate of Experience contains the following three elements, that are recorded in a comprehensive and clear way:
  - a. a specification of the parts/units of the national standard used for which validation/recognition is granted. These parts/units are named specifically (for VET standards for example per key task or working process);
  - b. based on what evidence for each separate part/unit the candidate has proved mastering of the competence at what level;
  - c. the relation between a and b: how and why does the evidence convince the assessor(s) that these competences/units of the national standard are to be validated/recognized for the candidate?

#### *Explanation*

In a VPL procedure all relevant evidence should be taken into consideration. In the Certificate of Experience all competences validated and recognized have to be named and listed specifically and the relation between the evidence and the competences validated needs to be clear. Competences can also be acquired through non-formal and informal learning. Therefore validation of learning outcomes needs to be curriculum independent. The instruments used need to be fit for purpose and should match the qualification standard. VPL providers can use the format and writing manual for the Certificate of Experience available at the national Expertise Center VPL. By using the format unity in Certificates of Experience is stimulated, which is helpful for the use of the Certificate of Experience in both the labour market and in education.

#### **Code 4. Assessors and counselors**

*Assessors and counselors are competent, independent and impartial. Independence and impartiality are crucial factors in the assessment and are embedded in the roles, tasks and responsibilities of assessors and counselors involved. It is essential that roles of VPL practitioners involved are not mixed; a counselor cannot be an assessor for the same candidate. Expertise of assessors and counselors can be enforced by training and networking and professional counseling with other VPL practitioners.*



- 4.1 In the VPL procedure the roles of counselors and assessors are strictly separated. The tasks, responsibilities and authorities of each of the assessors and counselors involved in a VPL procedure for an individual candidate are listed and recorded in writing.
- 4.2 Candidates receive guidance from a counselor in the process of making their competences visible and selecting and linking evidence to competences to illustrate their competence development.
- 4.3 The VPL provider assures that counselors and assessors are recruited, selected and trained according to the competence profile as developed and published by the National Expertise Center VPL and make sure the counselors and assessors at least have the following competences:
  - a. adequate expertise (knowledge, insight) on the subject matters in the qualification standard used in the VPL procedure;
  - b. use of relevant sources to keep up with state of the art developments in the subject matters, expertise areas and disciplines;
  - c. state of the art insights in current developments in relevant professional practice in industry;
  - d. adequate expertise (knowledge, insight) in criteria for validity of evidence.
- 4.4 The VPL provider needs to assure that the assessors have the following competences:
  - a. they are adequately capable of using the applicable assessment methods and instruments;
  - b. they are adequately capable of communicating and transferring their findings in an effective manner, both orally and in writing.
- 4.5 The VPL provider needs to provide evidence showing that all assessors and counselors have all relevant competences using files on their competences (development, assessment, evaluation).
- 4.6 There is no other relationship between the assessors and the candidate than is absolutely necessary and inevitable for the tasks of the assessors.

### *Explanation*

Assessors and counselors need to have such qualities and capabilities that there is no doubt about their expertise and skills. VPL providers need to make sure that the assessors and counselors involved perform their tasks up to the standards. VPL providers can hire and use each other's assessors and counselors yet remain responsible for the quality of these VPL professionals. VPL providers can also recruit, select, train and use new assessors and counselors during the time their accreditation is valid, or stop using certain assessors and/or counselors. For that reason the choice has been made not to require that VPL providers only use assessors and counselors that have been part of the audit procedure and have been investigated by the external audit panel. This would obstruct the flexibility of the organization and the procedure.

Because accreditation takes place on the level of domains (clusters of national qualification standards) the VPL provider needs to prove that VPL procedures related to all qualification standards involved can and will be executed in an adequate manner. In



the audit for domain accreditation emphasis will be put on recruitment, selection and training of assessors and on relevant working processes. That way it is systematically assured that a VPL provider is capable of executing VPL procedures related to all qualification standards in the domain. In audits for extension of accreditation output will be assessed, e.g. the quality of the Certificates of Experience written by the assessors. Individual assessors and counselors do not need to be experts on all qualification standards in the domain.

### **Code 5. Quality Assurance**

*The quality of VPL procedures is assured and is continuously improved. .*

*The quality of the methods and instruments used in the procedures is assured. There are regular evaluations. The results of these evaluations are used for improvement activities.*

5.1 The VPL provider evaluates in an adequate and systematic manner:

- a. the VPL procedures, with all involved, among which at least the candidates, the (paying) client (e.g. employer), the counselors and assessors;
- b. the quality of the assessors;
- c. the quality of the Certificates of Experience.

Structural elements in the evaluations are the quality of the information, the agreements made, the assessment methods and instruments used, the quality and competence of the assessors and counselors, the transferability of the Certificate of Experience, the course of the VPL procedure, the handling of complaints (if applicable), management, administration and registration.

5.2 The VPL provider converts outcomes of evaluations into actions for improvement and monitors the effectiveness of implementation of these actions. Evaluations and their outcomes, improvement actions and implementation of improvements are recorded in reports. These reports are kept available for at least three years.

5.3 The VPL provider systematically registers all issued Certificates of Experience for each domain and each qualification standard. In this registration it is also recorded which assessors were involved in the specific Certificate of Experience. When required by the audit organization the VPL provider can provide this information in a transparent way.

### *Explanation*

The VPL provider needs to have an adequate system of quality assurance. That way the VPL provider can intervene in time in case of deficiencies. Self-directed capabilities in ensuring quality of VPL services are guaranteed.

The VPL provider registers all issued Certificates of Experience on domain level. In this registration the VPL provider also keeps track of the assessors involved in the production and establishment of the Certificate of Experience. The overview in the registration can be used by auditing panels to determine whether or not the quality of the Certificates of Experience and the assessors is up to standards and if the provider successfully and effectively intervened (if necessary) to ensure the quality of the Certificates of Experience that have been issued.



## Authors

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**Kirsten Aagaard** is head of the National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning (NVR) (2007-) and Head of Centre for Lifelong Learning (2011- ) in Denmark. She is responsible for several research and development projects in validation of prior learning and involved in development, implementation and evaluation of validation activities. She has years of experience in the field of adult learning and education. She has contacts and networks in the field of validation of prior learning nationally and internationally. She cooperates with Ministries, Social partners, Educational institutions, Universities and stakeholders in the field of VPL. She is a member of the Expert Network for Validation in the Nordic Network for Adult Learning, [www.nordvux.net](http://www.nordvux.net)  
[kiaa@viauc.dk](mailto:kiaa@viauc.dk)

**Céleo Emilio Arias** is the Coordinator of studies, program and project at the Vice rectorry of UNAH, and a PhD Candidate studying the evaluation of informal learning, at the Department of Didactics of Political Education at Kassel University, Germany.  
[celeoarias@yahoo.com](mailto:celeoarias@yahoo.com)

**Anita Calonder Gerster** is co-founder and president of the CH-Q Association – the Swiss Qualification Programme for Career Development. She holds a degree in Organisational Psychology and has her own office for organisational consulting and applied research in Zumikon, Switzerland. Anita chaired the Swiss Federation for Adult Learning (SFA), and has been a member of the Federal Commission for Vocational and Professional Education and Training appointed by the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI and of the board of the former Swiss Association for Educational and Vocational Counseling.  
[anita.calonder@bluewin.ch](mailto:anita.calonder@bluewin.ch)

**Ruud Duvekot** is associate professor '*personalized learning*' at Inholland University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands. He is since 1995 involved in policy (-making and -research) on lifelong learning strategies and the validation of prior learning. He chaired the national working group on developing a national policy on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, resulting in the publication of "The glass is half filled" in 2001. He founded and managed the "Kenniscentrum EVC", the Dutch knowledge Centre on Validation of Prior Learning (VPL). He chairs the *European Centre Valuation Prior Learning* ([www.ec-vpl.eu](http://www.ec-vpl.eu)) and the Foundation 'Self-management of Competences CH-Q in the Netherlands and Flanders'.  
[rduvekot@gmail.com](mailto:rduvekot@gmail.com)

**Ellen Enggaard** is educational advisor and researcher at VIA University College, Denmark. She is responsible for the VPL programs and procedures at the University College and she works as a researcher for The National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior



Learning. As a teacher and researcher she is engaged in the fields of adult learning and education, work place learning, lifelong learning policies and practice.  
*ele@viauc.dk*

**Daniela Frison** holds a PhD in Educational Sciences. Her field of research at the University of Padua in Italy is on university-business cooperation and methods and tools to support adult learning. Since 2012 she is post-doctoral research fellow at the Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology and since 2008 she has been leading the PARIMUN project which aims at developing intervention-research based on business needs and carried out by graduating students. She works on projects of validation and certification of competences acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts.  
*daniela.frison@unipd.it*

**Sergij Gabršček** is director of the R&D unit at CPZ- International, a research institute in Slovenia. He works in the fields of management and evaluation of (general and vocational) education reform projects; development of secondary and higher education systems; development of assessment and examination and quality assurance systems for all levels of education, capacity and institutional building; development of formal and non-formal systems and validation of prior learning.  
*sergij.gabrscek@gmail.com*

**Hyeryung Jung** is a researcher in the Institute of Distance Education of Korea National Open University, South Korea. Her research areas are adult learning in higher education, qualitative research method in lifelong education, and professional development.  
*hyerjung@knou.ac.kr*

**Fjóra María Lárusdóttir** is project manager at the Education and Training Service Centre (ETSC) in Iceland. The Education and Training Service Centre was established in December 2002 by the Icelandic Confederation of Labour (ASÍ) and the Confederation of Icelandic Employers (SA) and is since 2010 also owned by the Federation of State and Municipal Employees, the Association of Local Authorities in Iceland and the Ministry of Finance. The role of the Centre is to be a collaborative forum of the founding parties for adult education and vocational training in cooperation with other educational bodies operating under the auspices of the member associations.  
*fjola@frae.is*

**Dae Joong Kang** is an associate professor in the Department of Education at Seoul National University, South Korea. He mainly teaches and advises students in the graduate program of lifelong education. His main research areas are adult and lifelong learning theories, life history method in education, and lifelong education program and policy development.  
*kdj@snu.ac.kr*



**Jung Hyun Kim** is a researcher in the Institute of Distance Education at Korea National Open University, South Korea. Her main research areas are educational administration theories, educational organization study, educational change and school consulting program.

*n29010@knou.ac.kr*

**Joy Van Kleef** has worked in the field of VPL for over 20 years. She has an Honours B. A. in Political Studies, an M.A. in Political Studies, a MAdEd in adult education, and a PhD in sociology. Joy's research and consultation work focus on quality in VPL for immigrant professionals and adults returning to formal education. In these areas she has provided consulting services for governments, sector councils, colleges and universities, professional regulatory bodies, and community based organizations.

She has designed and conducted VPL national consultations, environmental scans, and professional development on-line and in on-site training initiatives. She has set standards for assessment, developed organizational policies and procedures, piloted assessment tools, and conducted impact evaluations. She is a founding and active member of the Board of Directors of the Prior Learning International Research Centre (PLIRC).

*vankleef@sympatico.ca*

**Patrick Leushuis** is senior policy adviser at the Department of Higher Education and Student Finance of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science of the Netherlands. His main policy area is Lifelong Learning in Higher Education, including Validation of Prior Learning. He was secretary of an external advisory committee that published the report "Flexibel Higher Education for Adult Learners" in March 2014 and is currently working on policy measures following up on this advisory report. From 2006-2011 he has worked for the Project Directorate Learning & Working, an interdepartmental cooperation between the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. At the Project Directorate, he was project leader of national programs on VPL, Work Based Learning and Lifelong Learning in Higher Education. Before that he has been working in Higher Education Institutes as program leader on educational innovation and as project leader VPL.

*p.l.j.leushuis@minocw.nl*

**Sabrina Maniero** holds a PhD in Educational Sciences and works at the University of Padua, Italy as a post-doctoral research fellow at the Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, with a special focus on research on validation and certification of competences acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts. Her field of research is on young and adult guidance. She has professional experience in evaluation activities of vocational guidance projects for young people and adults and in management of adult guidance projects. She is tutor in the academic course of "Assessment and quality of formative processes", where she organises collaborative projects for students about the development of tools for authentic assessment.

*sabrina.maniero.1@unipd.it*



**Jane Murray** has continuous experience of 30 years work in education, across the fields of Early Childhood Education and Care, Primary Education and Teacher Education in the UK and internationally. She currently works as a researcher in the Centre for Education and Research (CeSNER) at the University of Northampton in the UK. Holding UK teacher and school leadership qualifications, Dr Jane Murray has led a teacher education degree and a postgraduate degree pathway in the field of early childhood education and care. In addition to the ALLinHE project, she has operated as an expert in international projects including a teacher education programme in Georgia funded by the Norwegian government and a project for the Deutsches Jugendinstitut focused on childcare for young children with disabilities. Dr Jane Murray's experience also includes organising workshops and study visits and working with educational staff from Indonesia, Taiwan and China on study visits.

*jane.Murray@northampton.ac.uk*

**Mauro Palumbo** is full professor at the Faculty Department of Educational Sciences at the University of Genoa. He is the scientific referent of the research project "Definition of a model of recognition, integration and validation of prior learning acquired in professional careers and training". He has published several books and essays, including: *Le competenze di lettura dei quindicenni liguri. L'indagine PISA 2009*, Genova University Press – De Ferrari editore, Genova (ed.); *Costruire e usare indicatori nella ricerca sociale e nella valutazione*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2010 (ed. with Claudio Bezzi e Leonardo Cannavò), *Ricerca sociale: metodo e tecniche*, con E. Garbarino, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2006 (with E. Garbarino), *Il processo di valutazione. Decidere, programmare, valutare*, Milano, Angeli, 2001.

*palumbo@unige.it*

**Nicoletta Piccardo** has a long experience in the field of vocational training and guidance. Has developed specific projects for companies and training organizations and is currently engaged in the development of the Inventory of professional profiles for the Region of Liguria in collaboration with a regional center for innovation and research. She works at the University research project "Definition of a model of recognition, integration and validation of prior learning acquired in professional careers and training".

*npiccardo@perform.unige.it*

**Henning Salling Olesen** is former Rector and professor at the Graduate School of Lifelong Learning, Roskilde University. He has written extensively about learning and working life, professions, and lifelong learning policies. Beside the writing referred to in the article he also edited a thematic issue of *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, "Cultural Analysis and in-depth Hermeneutics – Psycho-societal Analysis of Everyday Life Culture, Interaction and Learning (vol.13, no 3 – 2012).

*hso@ruc.dk*



**Anna Serbati** holds a PhD in Educational Sciences at the University of Padua. She is a post-doctoral research fellow at the Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, researching teacher professional development and academic educational innovation. Her field of specialization is the research on adult learning with a specific focus on processes and tools for the assessment and certification of competences acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts. In this area of research, she published articles and book chapters and she presented paper in international conferences. She coordinated research projects concerning design and delivery of academic curricula and methods and tools for identification and certification of competences; she has been European consultant within Tuning Russia and she is collaborating in the Tuning EU-US Study.  
*anna.serbati@unipd.it*

**Kim Shinil** is affiliated with Baekseok University, Korea. He is well recognised as one of the leading advocates and architects of adult and lifelong education in Korea, East Asia and internationally. As a scholar and policy maker in the field of education, Prof. Kim made extensive contributions to building a lifelong learning society in his nation, while also leading the charge in adult and continuing education. He is involved in the Korean Association of Adult Education, being elected its president in 1992-94. In 1994-2000, he has taken part in national policy making as a member of the Presidential Commission on Education Reform. In 2006 Prof. Kim was appointed as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education. As Deputy Prime Minister, he enhanced the visibility and stature of adult and continuing education in the country and internationally. An important achievement was the establishment of the graduate program of lifelong education for the Master's and doctoral degrees at Seoul National University.  
*kshinil@snu.ac.kr*

**Sonia Startari** holds a Ph.d. in sociology. She has a research allowance at the Department of Education at the University of Genoa. She deals from the time of the issue of recognition and competency assessment. She followed several experimental projects on evaluation methodologies and skills certification. She has worked at various adult education projects and corporate training, assessment services projects and evaluating professional skills.  
*Sonia.Startari@unige.it*

**Bernadette Thomas** is Deputy General Delegate for IFAP (Insertion, Formation et Activité Professionnelle) at Universcience, Head of the international network of the Cités des Métiers (40 centers for lifelong orientation and guidance). Holder of a PhD in Economic Sciences (University of Grenoble II, 1997), she was in previous functions successively teacher at the University of Oran (Algeria) then Madagascar, and researcher at the Universities of Lille then Grenoble. She manages European projects on lifelong learning for trade unions and since 2004 for the international network of Cités des métiers.  
*Bernadette.Thomas@universcience.fr*



**Metka Uršič** is director of CPZ-International, a research institute in Slovenia. The institute works in the following fields: evaluation and analysis of educational systems, employment and labour market; development of educational systems, of quality assurance and of curricula; research on learning specifics of adults and older adults and people with disabilities; assessment and development of competences (especially of unemployed and older adults); research in learning for the development of competences.

*metka.ursic@gmail.com*



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. 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 effective method in higher education, being able to integrate underrepresented groups and non-traditional learners effectively and quality-assured into lifelong learning at HE-levels?

The 1st VPL Biennale (April 9-11, 2014) was 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 Biennale, the aim was 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 was explained in the variety of approaches, practices and visions, first in the research programme of the ALLinHE-project itself and secondly in the presentation of the outcomes at the Biennale. Value was added to this ALLinHE-powered Biennale by presentations, workshops and masterclasses from other experts, practices and researchers too!

This book is nr. 2 in the VPL Biennale Series. Where the 1st book was the pre-Biennale book, this book is the post-Biennale book and can be considered as 'the proceedings of the 1st VPL Biennale' which was held at Inholland University in Rotterdam, the Netherlands on 9-11 April 2014. Also see [www.vplbiennale.com](http://www.vplbiennale.com).

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