European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning 2010
Country Report: Belgium (Flanders)

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1 NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON VALIDATION

The issue of validation of non-formal and informal learning is now well-established on the public policy agenda in Belgium, where initiatives have been developed in recent years in the context of a wider drive to improve access to Lifelong Learning. Responsibility for lifelong learning is shared between the Communities (Flemish, French-speaking and German-speaking), the Regions (Flemish Region or Flanders and Walloon Region or Wallonia) and the social partners. Formal legal frameworks for validation have been put in place in both the French and Dutch speaking parts of the country.

The concept of validation adopted in both communities relates mainly to vocational skills (gained through informal learning) although it does allow for the recognition of skills gained outside work in, for example, voluntary activities or even training activities. The scope of validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning at the moment does not cover such a wide range of qualifications as in other countries such as France or form the basis for the award of full diplomas or qualifications, except in the case of Higher Education.

As such, the Belgian Federal government plays little role in the detailed development and implementation of policies in the field. Where the recognition of skills impinges on employment policy, there is a shared competence with the Federal Government. Federal legislation may therefore come into play if the issue of validation affects the relationship between the employee and the employer. For example, the Federal Government must decide which categories of employees have the right to follow a validation procedure during working hours (paid education leave: see further) and the frequency with which this may occur. The Federal Government also makes decisions regarding access to regulated occupations or entrepreneurship and determines the conditions necessary to that end1.

In 1985, private-sector employees were given the right to paid training leave (Congé-Éducation Payé/ Betaald Educatief Verlof) of up to 180 hours per academic year to undertake work-related training, providing certain basic conditions are met. Since 2006 the ceiling has been lowered to 120 hours per year2. The training must be related to the individual’s job and fulfil a number of other criteria set down by the relevant legislation. If not related to the current employment the ceiling is 100 hours per year. Public sector employees have a similar right to training leave, although subject to different rules. This is referred to as Congé Formation / Opleidingsverlof. At the end of 2006 a decree was introduced (the Arrêté Royal du 10/11/2006) which integrated the validation of competences into the right to paid training leave.

A Federal law on the bilan de compétences (individual record of achievement) was passed in December 2001 and, following the approval of implementation legislation, officially entered into force in September 2002. This legislation grants every worker a right to a bilan de compétences and to be assessed to identify and validate the skills gained outside the formal education system3.

1.1 National legal framework, system or policy on validation

The question of validation of non-formal and informal learning has become a significant and high priority policy issue in Flanders. In Flanders, as in the Netherlands, the concept is generally referred to under the heading of Erkenning van Verworven Competenties or EVC (Recognition of Acquired Competences). Policy in this field has been closely linked to the Flemish government’s drive to develop an integrated approach to the provision of lifelong learning, as set out in July 2000 in the Action Plan: Een Leven Lang Leren in Goede Banen (Lifelong Learning on the Right Track). On the basis of the Action Plan, a working group

1 Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)
2 See http://www.emploi.belgique.be/defaultTab.aspx?id=536#
was established to investigate the best means to implement EVC. This group included a
team of academics, representatives of the Flemish Departments for Education,
Employment, Culture and Economics, along with the Flemish Employment and Training
Service (VDAB), the SME support service (VIZO), the Flemish social partners and the
‘Economic and Social’ and ‘Education’ Councils.

The outcome was an advisory paper³ containing a range of recommendations in order to
operationalise the hitherto relatively vague concept of EVC. One of the recommendations,
which was immediately implemented, was to start with pilot projects that would build on
prior experience with EVC.

**Higher education**

With regard to higher education, the recognition process of non-formal and informal
learning is defined by the 30 April 2004 decree on making higher education more flexible.
This process is linked to the Bologna Process and in particular to the introduction of the
BMD (Bachelor-Master-Doctorate) structure and of the ECTS (European Credit Transfer
System). It aims at the recognition of “knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes
acquired through learning processes for which no diploma was awarded”. It recognises
learning pathways in other establishments to encourage student mobility in initial education,
learning gained through personal and professional experience for adults wishing to enter or
re-enter universities. It allows non standard access, course exemptions (partially or in
totality), and credit transfers.

The process of recognition of non-formal and informal learning has been in place in
universities and colleges since September 2005. The process which has been established
aims at a double objective: on the one hand, it proposes to students a recognition of prior
formal learning acquired in other establishments in order to facilitate their mobility; on the
other hand, it widens the process of recognition to populations who can demonstrate that
they have acquired knowledge, skills and competences through professional or personal
experience. The immediate result of a successful recognition process is a proof of
competences (*bewijs van bekwaamheid*), which then in turn may lead to access to higher
education programmes, or to the award of credits or a full degree (on the basis of
exemption).

**Adult education**

On 15 June 2007, the Flemish Parliament approved the Flemish decree relating to (formal)
adult education. The decree pays great attention to the validation of acquired competences,
both with regard to dispensations and the certification of acquired competences. The
decree sets out a clear approach to the assessment and certification of acquired
competences in adult education. Distinction is made between the following actions:

- The measuring and testing of acquired competences as a function of the dispensations
  applied by the centres.

- The assessment of professional competences. The decree of 21 April 2004 (see below)
  relating to the Title of Professional Competence provides that the Adult education
  centres may act as assessment bodies.

The validation of acquired competences in the context of dispensations from course
components is the responsibility of the director of an educational institution.

**Department of Work**

In April 2004, the Flemish government recognised non-formal and informal learning via the
Decree on 'Titles of Professional Competence', which later became known as ‘certificates of

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³ Ruim Baan voor Competenties, Advies voor een Model van (H)erkenning van Verworven Competenties in Vlaanderen: Beleidsconcept en aanzetten tot Operationalisering

vocational experience’. Employees or job-seekers in the Flemish community can acquire a certificate of vocational experience if they demonstrate that they have learned or acquired certain skills required to exercise an occupation, as defined by the labour market (sectoral social partners) in a standard.

The Flemish government awards a certificate of vocational experience ‘to people who have professional experience, but do not have a diploma’. Many people have learned a trade ‘on the job’ and so have clear professional competence. But they cannot prove that in black and white. That is why the Flemish government launched the certificate for vocational experience. The certificate enables people to literally ‘cash in’ on their competences, no matter where they gained them. In the Flemish Community employees or job-seekers can acquire a ‘certificate of vocational experience’ if they demonstrate that they have acquired the skills needed to exercise an occupation, as defined by the sectoral social partners in a standard. (Decree of the Flemish Government - April, 2004).5

The arrangements set up by the Department of Work essentially aim at the recognition of non formal and informal learning through the ‘certificate of vocational experience’ (Titel van Beroepsbekwaamheid) created by the 30 April 2004 decree. The objective is to recognise professional (formal and informal learning) and non-professional (informal learning) experience by a new qualification. What is actually being assessed and certified are the competences required to function adequately in a specific occupation, as defined by the labour market. The certificate is awarded by the Department of Work. The organisations wishing to assess applicants are recognised by the Minister of Work after they have fulfilled the procedure for accreditation by responding to a call for proposals by the European Social Fund agency.

Departments of Culture, Youth and Sports

At the moment, general arrangements concerning recognition of non-formal and informal learning inspired by these new orientations in regional policies do not currently exist at policy level. The main reason is that these sectors remain relatively impervious to global approaches, and to what could appear to the authorities as some kind of standardisation. We can only identify local (as well as interesting and diverse) experiences and initiatives of a single association or institution. Presently, there are standards that could be applied to this type of activities. Certificates issued to participants in these types of learning or training activities are in general known as “certificates of participation”, which are mainly based on self assessment practices rather than on institutional or formal assessments, except for the – formal – procedures and diplomas within the Flemish Trainers School.

1.2 Relationship with the existing/ developing qualifications framework and information on standards used for validation

The Parliament Act on the Flemish qualifications structure6 is an important step as recognised qualifications will be the starting point to develop procedures for the recognition of acquired competences and for the quality assurance of these procedures. The Parliament Act on the Flemish qualifications structure was approved by the Flemish Parliament at the end of April 2009. It lays down the qualifications framework (the Flemish equivalent of a NQF) and the level descriptors, the types of qualifications as well as the procedures to recognise them.

In time, the Flemish qualifications structure will develop into a classification of qualifications recognised by the Flemish Government. A qualification is a comprehensive set of competences leading to a recognised certificate granted by the Flemish Community, indicating the competences relevant to exercise a profession or a social function or which are required for further education. Thus the qualifications structure serves as a guide to individuals as to what they can achieve through competence development. Individuals can

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5 ReferNet Belgium, Overview of the Vocational Education and Training System, 2008
acquire qualifications inside or outside education or through a procedure for the recognition of acquired competences (EVC). Qualifications are described through competences and are given a ‘qualification level’ allowing the objective comparison of qualifications. Through this common reference framework providers of education and training as well as the labour market will be able to communicate more easily about qualifications, in both Flanders and Europe. Moreover, the qualifications structure will make the various learning systems and their results more transparent.

By using a learning outcomes approach, this NQF will be a support for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning and for increasing the relevance of the education and training system by adapting the curriculum to societal expectations and demands of industry.

Therefore, the Decree on the Flemish qualifications framework prescribes that the social partners within the Social Economic Council of Flanders (SERV) will be responsible for developing the qualification references for VET by the description of occupational profiles.

The Flemish qualifications framework will be used as the reference framework for the recognition of prior learning procedures in the Flemish Community of Belgium. Once the qualifications standards are developed, linked to the Flemish QF and adopted by the Flemish Government, they will underpin the assessment of learning outcomes of non-formal and informal learning. In this way these assessments will be comparable in content with those for the learning outcomes of formal learning. Skills and competences will be assessed to the same reference standards, independent of the learning context, provider or assessment procedure.

Within this logic, the Flemish QF will become the basis for the recognition of diplomas and certificates awarded by the different Flemish competent bodies and, via the EQF, by other Belgian or foreign competent bodies.

The Parliament Act distinguishes between professional and educational qualifications. A professional qualification is a set of competences allowing an individual to exercise a profession. An individual can only acquire an educational qualification through education and only institutions recognised by the Flemish authorities can grant certificates for these qualifications. Individuals may acquire professional qualifications both inside and outside education. Professional qualifications are situated on all levels of the qualifications framework. The occupational profiles developed by the Flanders Social and Economic Council, SERV, serve as the basis for the professional qualifications. The SERV submits the occupational profiles for acknowledgement as a professional qualification to the competent service of the Flemish government, the Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training.

The Parliament Act on the Flemish qualifications structure contains specific provisions for certain sectors, such as Culture, Sport and Youth. This procedure is only applicable for roles people take up in society and for which the SERV does not find it appropriate to formulate a professional competence profile, but for which the sector believes it is necessary and relevant for the community to develop a professional qualification.

Standards used for validation

The ‘certificate of vocational experience’ or ‘title of professional competence’ is an officially recognised certificate issued by the Flemish government. The certificate confirms that an individual has acquired specific professional skills. For every experience certificate, specific standards are drawn up for each occupation by SERV and the sectoral social partners.

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8 National Report 2009 of the Flemish Community (Belgium) “Education and Training 2010”
9 National Report 2009 of the Flemish Community (Belgium) “Education and Training 2010”
These occupational standards consist of the professional competence profiles that describe what may be expected of a practitioner of a given profession.

For each occupation on the final list the SERV starts the procedure to set the standard by which candidates for a certificate will be assessed. Standard setting is done by following a specific methodology: i.e. interviews with professionals, with persons responsible for in-company training, expert groups then assess the different drafts of the standards. These experts are nominated by the sectoral organisations of employers and trade unions.

These standards focus on up to 10 key competences. Key competences are crucial to adequately perform in the job and therefore must be included in the standard for assessment of the candidates. Each key competence is described in observable behavioural or performance indicators called ‘success criteria’.

The first standards were published in 2006. At the time of writing about 48 standards exist for which assessment centres are already accredited (crane operator, industrial painter, weaver, hairdresser, butcher, bus and coach driver, call centres operator, etc)\(^{11}\).

### 1.3 National institutional framework

Three policy areas, namely Work and Social Economy, Education and Training and Culture, Youth, Sports and Media are critical to non-formal and informal learning. Since June 2009 the Flemish Government has three different Ministers for these areas: the Minister of Work (including vocational training linked to employment) and Sports, the Minister for Education, Training and Youth and a Minister for Culture.

The policy areas of employment and education are however still two separate domains from the administrative point of view, resulting in two different departments and administrations: the Department of Education and Training, the Department of Culture, Youth and Sports and the Department of Work.

### 1.4 Division of responsibilities (national, regional, local, provider level) according to the different aspects of validation

Specifically for the certificate for vocational experience, a procedure was developed to deal with the different aspects of validation.

The decree of 30 April 2004 regarding the acquisition of a title of professional competence outlined an initial framework with regard to procedures and responsibilities. The Flemish government was attributed key decision-making responsibilities, with support from the SERV and the Education Council (VLOR). For example, the SERV delivers annual advice to the Flemish government regarding the selection of experience certificates, taking into account the following criteria:

- bottleneck occupations
- presence of an occupational profile
- pilot experience with the assessment of acquired skills
- need for a balanced mix of sectors and levels of skills\(^{3}\)
- extent of support from the sectoral partners.

Besides this initiative of the Department of Work, other structures were created:

The government plays a coordinating, structuring and integrating role. Policy support is forthcoming through an interdepartmental structure created in pursuit of ‘Better Administrative Policy (BBB-Beter Bestuurlijk Beleid). The departments of Education and Training, Work and Social Economy and Culture, Youth and Sports are involved.

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\(^{11}\) Jaarrapport ervaringsbewijs. Departement Werk en Sociale Economie ism de interdepartementale stuurgroep OV&W, het Subsidieagentschap Werk en Sociale Economie & het ESF-agentschap. 1 januari 2009-31 december 2009, pp. 3-4
To facilitate integrated policy support, work is ongoing on an integrated structure that is designed to simplify and reinforce cooperation between the various policy areas. The Project Strategic Education and Training Policy (Project Strategisch Onderwijs- en Vormingsbeleid) was set up for this purpose within the department of Education and Training.

The government is also the driving force behind the development of a vision and a long-term perspective for lifelong learning and for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. The government has launched an inter-ministerial initiative to develop an integrated vision for EVC procedures, covering all sectors. This new holistic ‘strategy’ should be ready in 2011.  

Institutions placed under the responsibility of the ministries have adopted a pragmatic logic of progressive implementation, specific to each ministerial department. They conceive their role more as one of guidance and facilitation rather than of promotion based on a defined vision of the future which can be translated into action. This attitude is encouraged by the fact that recognition of non-formal and informal learning inevitably poses new challenges to the public administration, which require new approaches in the way they must be solved.

1.5 Examples of regional, local or EU funded initiatives

The Belgian Maintenance Society (BEMAS) was involved in a project funded by the Leonardo da Vinci programme, entitled Validmaint. The project partners – from Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Sweden - developed an online test to identify the competences and knowledge of maintenance technicians. The test is based on an online database, which contains over 1300 questions. A random selection of these questions is selected for each candidate, in order to enable the candidate to validate his or her competences. Employers use these tests to support the processes of recruitment, training, staffing and outsourcing. Validmaint is based on a competence model, developed and approved by the European Federation of National Maintenance Societies, EFNMSvzw. Further information about the project can be found on the website.

PhoenixKM was involved in the project Validating Mentoring 2, which was partially funded with support from the European Commission. The project aimed to meet the needs of disabled and disadvantaged people. Through the project a system was developed to ensure the recognition of the non-formal and informal learning of the target group (people with disabilities and/or other disadvantages in accessing employment, education or training) in Belgium, Bulgaria, Turkey and the UK. The project built upon three previously-funded European projects and aimed to update, revise and extend a range of existing tools and instruments, centred around a Code of Practice for Mentoring, in order to actively support the planning, implementation and evaluation of mentoring schemes. Mentoring programmes were developed in various countries for disabled people, older people and young people who were considered ‘at risk’. The mentoring programme was designed to teach them about the principles and practices of effective, high quality, mentoring and validation. Furthermore a comprehensive system for the self-assessment of mentoring programmes was developed. Every participant who takes part in the mentoring programme receives a certificate of successful completion. The completion of the programme is based on the Code of Practice in Mentoring. The Code of Practice provides a framework for the recognition of knowledge and skills acquired through the mentoring process. It also contains a tool for external verification of the quality of mentoring. Further information can be found on the project website.

12 Interview with Department of Education and Training
14 http://www.validmaint.be/indexen.html
15 http://www.vm2-project.eu/index.php
1.6 Link between validation and the existing/ developing credit system, unit-based or modularised structure of qualifications

Modularisation

Within the reform of the vocational training system the Flemish authorities have worked on the implementation of a modularised, output-based training model for adult education. In this context, the issue of assessment and recognition of non-formal learning has been raised\(^{16}\). This reform is an effort to link the different providers of vocational training in Flanders (Department of Education and Training, Department of Labour and Department of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises). The modularisation project aims at establishing such a link through the development of a common set of competence standards. The social partners are heavily involved in this work. Modularisation is an important tool in reducing the number of people leaving compulsory education with no qualifications. When learners obtain certificates, even if partial, they gain recognition of their knowledge that increases their chances of finding a job or attending further training.

Modularisation is therefore intended to provide a bridge between initial education and continuing training in order to encourage lifelong learning. A further aim of modularisation is to adapt training to the qualification being demanded in the labour market with a view to improved transparency. Modules are designed on the basis of the occupational profiles drawn up by the social partners under the co-ordination of the Economic and Social Council of Flanders.

In order to optimise the training opportunities provided by this system, bridges have been created between study areas and the various training schemes offered, for instance by Flanders Enterprise (VLAO)/ the Flemish Agency for Entrepreneurial Training (SYNTRA) and the Public Employment and vocational training Service (VDAB). The Flemish work has leaned strongly towards the experiences gained in the Netherlands. Both the Dutch system of qualification standards and the accreditation of prior learning methodologies developed over recent years are important points of reference. Agreements between the Ministry of Education in the Netherlands and the Flemish Department of Education give priority to the exchange of information on the issue of identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning. The aim is that steps should be taken towards co-operation, co-ordination and learning from each other.

Credit system

Flanders has hardly any experience of a credit system. In the framework of lifelong learning, it is necessary to make qualifications transferable between education and training establishments, between regions and between the countries of Europe. To offer the possibility of validating learning outcomes and transferring them independent of the time and place of learning, independent of the training establishment or the individual learning path, there is a need for a neutral value appraisal of what has been learnt. A credit system may be developed for that purpose, based on credits that are thus a standardised quantitative measure of the scope of the learning that leads to the acquisition of the competences of a qualification.

Non-formal and informal learning are not linked to credits. The practice of credits has, however, been used in higher education since the introduction of the flexibilisation decree for higher education. The credits in higher education are based on an accepted international unit (ECTS) to measure the extent of a study year and the study time of a student per course component.

The linking of credits to non-formal and informal learning paths or, more concretely, to qualifications is probably the next step in the process towards the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in Belgium. However, ECTS study points cannot be used for the

\(^{16}\) ReferNet Belgium, Overview of the Vocational Education and Training System, 2008
allocation of credits in such learning contexts because the study points are based on the number of hours of learning activity. This applies to a lesser extent to training courses following non-formal learning paths, because study points are sometimes involved. However, it is impossible to give credits for informal learning paths on the basis of study points. In the Flemish qualifications structure, credits are therefore not linked to study points.\(^\text{17}\)

### 1.7 Funding framework

There is currently no budget allocated by the Flemish government to the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The holistic ‘strategy’ for EVC that the government is currently developing should include priority areas where support will be provided and funding allocated. It is indeed considered that lack of funding is undermining the development of validation in Flanders, since education institutions do have to bear the various costs entailed by validation (development of methodology, procedures etc.). Individuals also have to bear some of the associated costs.

For the recognition of competences according to the certificate for vocational experience, the European Social Fund (45%) with co-financing from the Flemish Government (55%) makes the necessary financial resources available to the assessment centres on the basis of project funding. The organisations wishing to assess applicants have to apply for accreditation by responding to a call for proposals by the ESF-agency. Each assessment centre receives a certain amount per assessment (EUR 240 for guidance, EUR 960 - 1200 or EUR 1440 per assessment, depending on the occupation) and also a budget for promotion. These assessment centres also receive, since 2009, funding for the development of the assessment methodology and procedure. After these periods of development, the assessment must be validated by the ESF-agency (through experts and peers).

In terms of socio-cultural work for young people and adults, organisations may be recognised and receive a government subsidy for their activities. This includes training in a non-formal context. Regarding youth work, the costs of staff training in youth work in the period before the Flemish Youth Policy Decree (Vlaams Jeugdbeleid) of 2002 could be subsidised. The Flemish Youth Policy Decree introduced funding with no strings attached. This replaced a direct connection between staff training and subsidy. With this financing, the vocational training establishments are responsible for the setting up of vocational training courses. The certification is effected by the Youth Department (Afdeling Jeugd) of the Flemish Government or the Agency for socio-cultural adult and youth work (‘Intern verzelfstandigd agentschap (IVA) Sociaal-Cultureel werk voor Jeugd en Volwassenen’). The cost for the certification is part of the main funding for the training.

### 1.8 Data on flows of beneficiaries

The figures presented below have been collected for each sector. The number of participants is still limited.\(^\text{18}\)

#### Higher education

Statistics cover the period from 2005 to 2008. The number of applicants for the five associations (see section 2.1 for an explanation of what the ‘associations’ are) has decreased from 663 in 2005-2006 to 412 in 2007-2008.

In relation to the opportunity offered by the decree of 30 April 2004 allowing associations to award full degrees, between 2005-2006 and 2007-2008 nine applicants in four associations have benefited from this new programme. The applications with positive results are

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\(^{17}\) Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning. OECD Thematic Review. Flanders (Belgium). Country Note and Country Background Report

decreasing too, but the success ratio remains high: 73.79%. Most of the applications are in the study fields of health care and education.\textsuperscript{19}

\textit{Department of Work}

Statistics cover an active period from November 2006 to April 2010. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning focuses on 48 occupations (bus driver, coach driver, industrial painter, tower crane operator, nursery worker and call centre operator) at 29 different assessment centres. 2039 certificates of vocational experience have been awarded. 3563 candidates have registered and are currently in the process of receiving guidance, undergoing assessment or have just gone through the process,

\textit{Culture, Youth and Sport}

Data are not available in the education and social promotion sectors, or in the sector of culture and youth. For culture, youth and sports EVC is in a first phase, therefore the number of beneficiaries are not available at the moment, since most of the projects have just started.

For Sports however, the Flemish Trainers School registers data concerning applications for ‘assimilations’ or ‘equivalences’ (i.e. confirmation of the equivalence of another qualification with one of those of the Flemish Trainers School). The average number of approved applications for equivalences dealt with by the Flemish Trainers School per year is estimated at about 87.

\section{2 ORGANISATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON VALIDATION}

\subsection{2.1 Role of the formal education and training sector, including providers}

The procedures for recognition of prior learning which were already integrated in legislation before the Bergen meeting of Ministers responsible for Higher Education\textsuperscript{20} (Decree on flexible learning in Flemish Higher education – 2004) have been simplified and improved in the Law on the establishment of measures for restructuring and flexibility in higher education (2006).

Each ‘association’ (cooperation platform between universities and university colleges) is legally authorised to act as an agency for the validation of prior learning. This validation of prior learning and/or of professional experience may lead to:

- Access to higher education programmes;
- Awarding of credits either shortening of study duration or granting a degree.

The procedure is as follows:

1. Applicants have to introduce a portfolio presenting prior learning experiences;
2. Assessment by the validation agency of the ‘association’ taking into account the learning outcomes of the programme applied for;
3. Issuing of a competence certificate, which is the basis for access or waivers for certain courses in the programme.

These associations are confederations of one university and at least one non-university higher education institution. An association is an authority organising, on a geographical basis, cooperation between a university and several colleges providing vocational education and training programmes. Currently five associations exist:


\textsuperscript{20} Ministers responsible for higher education in 45 European countries met in Bergen on 19-20 May 2005. They took stock of the progress of the Bologna Process and set directions for the further development towards the European Higher Education Area to be realised by 2010.
The Catholic University of Leuven Association (Associatie Katholieke Universiteit Leuven);

The Ghent University Association (Associatie Universiteit Gent);

The Antwerp University and Colleges Association (Associatie Universiteit en Hogescholen Antwerpen);

The University Association of Brussels (Universitaire Associatie Brussel); and

The University-Colleges Association in Limburg (Associatie Universiteit-Hogescholen Limburg).

Universities have made the decision to entrust these associations with the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Each association is therefore responsible for the implementation of its own arrangements. There is currently no coordination between the associations to facilitate students’ mobility, for instance by a reciprocal recognition of their arrangements. Discussions have been launched but they meet reluctance and hesitation and to date, there is not a system capable of establishing mutual confidence and guaranteeing the quality assurance set up by the associations.

All public and private training providers can apply for accreditation as an assessment authority. To guarantee fair treatment of individuals and transparent assessment, the assessment centres recognised for the certificate for vocational experience must comply with nationally determined standards and assessment directives (these rules are defined in the decision of the Flemish Government in realising the decisions of the Decree of 30/4/2004)

Recognition agencies have the following responsibilities:

- to determine a format for the experience certificates;
- to confer and award the experience certificates on the basis of the advice from the accredited assessment agency;
- data management - identification data assessment results;
- the low-threshold installation and management of a databank with formats for the talents passport, titles, standards, guidelines etc;
- awareness-raising among potential applicants;
- awareness-raising among interested parties such as employers, education establishments and providers of training courses;
- monitoring.

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning is also provided by adult education centres (Centra voor Volwassenenonderwijs – CVO or Adult Education Centres- and Centra voor Basiseducatie – CBE or Basic Adult Education Centres-). The decree on Adult Education of 15 June 2007 stipulates that adult education centres have the task to organise EVC procedures. These EVC procedures can lead to exemptions for parts of study programmes (but not for awarding diplomas, as this is only possible in Higher Education).

2.2 Role of existing information, advice and guidance networks / institutions

In June 2009, an expertise network for EVC providers (around 200) was launched including an official EVC website (see: www.vlaanderen.be/evc ). The aim of this network and website is to support and enhance the quality of EVC procedures, and support RAC providers. The members of the network are experts in EVC, working in different sectors: higher education, adult education, assessment centres for the certification of work experience (‘ervaringsbewijs’), continuing vocational training, the cultural sector, youth and sport sector. To enhance the quality of EVC procedures, two tools for self-evaluation are
now tested: the ‘quality kit’ for EVC and the common principles and criteria for portfolio use. Both tools are the result of research financed by the Flemish authority

In terms of informing potential candidates, it is anticipated that the EVC website will also aim to inform the wider public on the different EVC possibilities. The Department of Work is undertaking a number of methods of information provision (see section 3.1). In addition, an agreement has been signed with the public employment Service (VDAB), which informs all the unemployed persons and refers them to specific assessment centres. In the area of higher education, recognition is part of the information and orientation process of each HEI. However, only in a few cases is specific information provided.

The government is aware that more efforts are needed in terms of information and foresees that the newly set up Quality Agency (see section 4.1) will in the future be a one stop shop for information about all existing EVC procedures in place in Flanders.

2.3 Validation in the private sector and the role of private sector actors

Social partners

Social partners, at both cross-sectoral and sectoral level, were involved, in collaboration with the public actors, in the definition of systems of references for the validation of skills. The sectors have been encouraged to validate training through sectoral certification systems or ‘vocational training passports’.

In the Flemish community, the involvement of the social partners in drawing up the priorities and the growth path for the certificate for vocational experience was established in the Flemish employment agreement for 2005-2006, in the decree on a title for professional competence and in the agreement between the Flemish Government and the social partners, The Competence Agenda (2007-2010).

The authorisation to perform assessment procedures for the certificate of vocational experience (‘Titels van Beroepsbekwaamheid’) is given by the Ministry. The procedure is as follows:

21 National Report 2009 of the Flemish Community (Belgium) “Education and Training 2010”
22 Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning, OECD Thematic Review. Flanders (Belgium). Country Note and Country Background Report
specific jobs. These developments are generally used within businesses to feed into remuneration decisions (linking pay to skills), mobility within the firm and recruitment policies and requirements.

However, the range of models and the way they are implemented remains very varied and where validation procedures exist, these are generally not recognised outside the company or sector. In general, standards, which may or may not be validated in a formal manner, tend to be framed on the basis of a particular job description, rather than skills and personal development of the individual. This means that much firm-based validation of skills does not lead to ‘qualifications’ that are recognised in the wider labour market.

2.4 Validation in the third sector and the role of third sector actors

In Flanders, SoCiU$S$, the support service for social and cultural adult education, is an autonomous body with the objective of strengthening the social and cultural sector. One of its stated aims is to ensure that social and cultural organisations play an important role in lifelong learning. As noted in the previous European Inventory report for Belgium\(^{23}\), a working group was set up in 2005, led by SoCiU$S$ and FOV (Federation of Organisations active in the popular (non-formal) adult education scene), with the task of developing a vision around EVC in socio-cultural work. In the same year, a visionary text on EVC was developed by the socio-cultural sector, including the policy areas Youth (represented by *Steunpunt Jeugd*) and Sport (represented by the VSF). In this vision, the term ‘recognition’ or ‘assessment’ is taken to mean “the assessment of the listed skills that are supported by documentary evidence. Such assessment happens on the basis of (a) reference framework(s), also known as (a) standard(s). Such assessment may be done by the individual himself or herself, by means of a self-evaluation. The latter is especially the case when EVC has a formative function”.

Currently, organisations in socio-cultural adult education can, at their own discretion, issue a certificate to their members for a completed course of training (these certificates can be downloaded from the SoCiU$S$ website). Within youth work, attestations for vocational training are delivered by the Flemish government (the Youth Department). The recognition and assessment of skills in the Sports sector is the remit of the sports agency BLOSO (*Intern Verzelfstandig Agentschap met rechtspersoonlijkheid*)\(^{24}\).

Three types of certificates were created:

- The learning certificate “is a piece of documentary evidence of experience in education and vocational training. It is a form that is issued by the entity organising the activity after completion of a training, study day, course,...” It is therefore a proof of participation by the person in question. The learning certificate also states the educational objectives of the training activity. To increase the recognition of such a certificate SoCiU$S$ provides a common format for organisations in this sector. There are currently no strict conditions to be satisfied for issuing learning certificates.

- A skills certificate shows that a coherent whole of skills has in fact been acquired. In order to obtain a skills certificate an assessment must therefore be conducted. The awarding body guarantees that the skills are in fact present and controls the quality of the process and the applied standards. The same format is used for a skills certificate as for the learning certificate, supplemented with a description of the skills and the level at which they were acquired.

- A function certificate “shows that a particular function as volunteer was performed during a certain period”. Besides the recognition of acquired skills, this certificate is therefore also a form of appraisal of the applied effort. Function certificates not only recognise the visible, describable functions but also the less obvious.

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\(^{24}\) Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)
The initial goal of the learning certificate, skills certificate and function certificate was to encompass the variety of practices in the sector. But the practices in the sector have proven to be even more diverse. Moreover, the use of different terms for different certificates was not useful. Therefore, all types of certificates can now be included in a ‘learning book’ called Oscar which can be used as a portfolio to group together experience from informal and non-formal learning environments. They are integrated in the portfolio with the denominator: competence documents. In this regard, a learning certificate is a competence document with no assessment of the obtained competences. A skills certificate is a document with an assessment of the competences and an explanation of the assessment. A function certificate is a document with an assessment of the competences and an explanation of the assessment. A function certificate is a competence document for a function of role.

The portfolio project ‘Oscar’ was set up in 2008 by SoCiuS and Steunpunt Jeugd with financial support of the Flemish government (funding) to further develop the learning book. It is an instrument mainly for organisations and participants from social-cultural work for young people and adults. This portfolio instrument is an easily accessible tool for the validation of lifelong learning for personal development and social participation on the one hand and a contribution to educational or professional development on the other hand. To make the instrument flexible in all circumstances, it will be made compatible with other EVC procedures. It is a simple and uniform tool to make and collect documents of competences by organisations and participants of socio-cultural work for youths and adults. There are no data on implementation available yet, since the project only started in 2008. The pilot project for EVC with voluntary work is more or less integrated in Oscar.

SoCiuS emphasises that there are fundamental differences with regard to the recognition of skills in socio-cultural adult education, compared with the policy areas Education and Work. In socio-cultural adult education, the actors involved prefer to develop their own instruments and procedures and for vocational training providers to choose the way in which they will or will not develop their training and whether they wish to recognise the acquired skills. This freedom is seen as crucial. The main concern of socio-cultural adult education is that the recognition of acquired skills involving training work is excessively geared towards the award of diplomas. This would mean that training courses would need to be highly structured and formalised, with clear objectives and assessment. Stakeholders from socio-cultural education fear that the emphasis is therefore placed on the acquisition of diplomas, rather than the acquisition of skills. Moreover, a pilot project for EVC within voluntary work showed that regarding tools, volunteers are less willing to use ‘hard’ assessment tests but prefer self-evaluation tools, such as a personal portfolio.

SoCiuS is also working on a second project about a competence framework for socio-cultural workers. The main objective is to develop a reflection tool for learning organisations to meet goals and mission statements, to reflect on competences, etc. In other words, it must become an instrument for training, schooling and education within a social-cultural organisation. This project is still in development.

The recognition of informal learning is also starting to develop in the heritage sector. FARO, the Flemish support service for cultural heritage, has developed a reflection track with monthly sessions on ‘competences, profiles and the heritage sector’ from 2009-2010.

2.5 Costs to organisations

Most institutions do not see a real immediate economic return in the process. The usual sources of funding are found in learning and training activities. Giving exemptions to an applicant means that institutions lose money because the recognition process currently does not generate new incomes and requires heavy investments. This is a particularly sensitive issue because the staff involved in this process are often very competent, experienced people.
Legislative responsibility for the recognition and assessment of competences in the Sports sector lies with BLOSO. BLOSO provisionally finances the assessment of incoming applications itself. In an interview with a BLOSO officer, there was an unwillingness to assess ‘mass’ EVC applications on account of insufficient resources. The Flemish Trainers School is preparing a dossier on the subject in the framework of EVC. Applications for assimilations and dispensations do not cost anything for the applicant. Costs for processing the files are subsidised, but this does not take into account the number of files. At present, the processing of files is part of the normal activities of BLOSO. The cost price for processing a file is not included in the calculations.

3 INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVE

3.1 Awareness-raising and recruitment

So far very little information and promotion activities have been implemented in Flanders regarding validation.

Information campaigns are starting now to target potential users more systematically, mainly at the Department of Work. This department has set up an information telephone line, posters have been put up in employment centres and leaflets describing the application process for each certificate of professional competence have been distributed. Also an agreement was signed with the public employment Service (VDAB), which informs all the unemployed persons and refers them to specific assessment centres. In 2010 the Department of Work organised different information sessions for intermediate partners (trade unions, restructuring organisations etc.) to inform them about the certificate and to ask them to refer candidates.

In the area of higher education, recognition is part of the information and orientation process of each HEI. However, only in a few cases is specific information provided. The caution that seems to be exercised at the different levels and the reduced number of certificates open for recognition and of institutions mobilised seem currently to restrict the dissemination process.

Given the complexity of the current situation and the multiple procedures in place in the different sectors, the government is aware that more efforts are needed in terms of information and foresees that the newly set up Quality Agency (see below) will in the future be a one stop shop for information about all existing EVC procedures in place in Flanders.

In the future, the website supporting the expertise network for EVC providers (www.vlaanderen.be/evc) will also aim to inform the wider public of the different EVC possibilities.

3.2 Provision of guidance and support

In order to obtain a certificate of vocational experience an individual must approach an accredited assessment authority (test centre). All public and private training providers can apply for accreditation as an assessment authority. Accredited assessment agencies have the following mission (as defined in the decree of 30/4/2004):

- to create an assessment methodology and develop one or more assessment tools, based on the nationally determined standard and directives for assessment;
- to offer guidance, on request, in the listing of skills and the compilation of a talents passport;

to assess the applicant's acquired skills through analysis of the talents passport, a practical test and (if desired) a theoretical test;

- to give feedback on the applicant's assessment result and, if necessary, formulate advice for a course of training or additional work experience;

- to formulate and send notice of the awarding of a title by the recognition agency (Department of Work). This advice contains a report on the assessment.

**Use of ICT systems**

The introduction and composition of portfolios is regarded as one of the most important elements in most initiatives around recognition of acquired competences. The government also attaches great importance to the subject and supports the development of a coherent recognition of acquired competences policy through defining common principles for portfolios in the fields of education, work and culture.

In higher education, the associations have offered all students the possibility to work with an e-portfolio since the academic year 2004-2005. In general, however, the e-portfolio in Flanders is still in the development phase. In various areas, steps have been taken towards the development of an e-portfolio.

### 3.3 Costs to individuals

In terms of costs, this is determined at basic level by the legislation. Institutions can ask for a basic fee to cover administrative costs and for an additional amount, which is related to the number of competences to be identified during the assessment phase.

The procedure for recognition of acquired competences or qualifications in higher education does not involve any costs to the individual, unless it relates to certificates for which the institution does not know the ‘value’ and considers it necessary to order an additional proficiency test. This is the case for competences acquired outside formal education, that is, through non-formal or informal learning. In that case, the associations are responsible for recognition and assessment and also for the cost price of the proficiency test. The maximum cost for the assessment varies:

- EUR 590 for a proficiency assessment at academic or professional bachelor level;
- EUR 770 for a proficiency assessment at master level if the individual has no bachelor degree;
- EUR 230 for a proficiency assessment at master level if the individual has a bachelor degree;
- EUR 55 administrative cost for a proficiency assessment for partial elements of a study + cost depending on the number of competence assessments to be undertaken.

According to the latest figures the associations calculate and charge different prices for a validation procedure. The average cost price for the individual in 2007-2008 per association (without the administrative cost of EUR 55) is:

- The Catholic University of Leuven Association: EUR 122
- The Ghent University Association: EURO 155
- The Antwerp University and Colleges Association: EURO 256
- The University Association of Brussels: EURO 155

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- The University-Colleges Association in Limburg: EUR 112

The procedure for recognition of acquired competences or qualifications in adult education does not involve any costs. There are two exceptions to that rule:

- EUR 15 for students who have enrolled in a distance course and want their competences assessed;
- EUR 15 for students who take up the procedure of assessment through the decentralised examination boards in order to obtain a secondary education diploma.

Payments for registration and assessment (except in the Department of Work), even if not very high comparatively to those linked to learning or training sessions, are probably acceptable to individuals with high incomes or who will understand the value of their investment later; but they can be a real obstacle for the promoters of the system if they want to attract under-qualified people or people from underprivileged groups.

The costs of non-formal and informal learning on the labour market include the payment of the wages of the employee during his or her absence and the costs of the procedure itself. If employees do not want to inform their employer by asking for paid educational leave, they have to take a day off work.

The government, the employer, or the sectoral vocational training fund may in principle bear costs such as operating, administrative and personnel costs. The sectors manage the sectoral vocational training courses whereby a regulation in the matter will be developed via a Collective Labour Agreement (CLA) within the federal framework. An interprofessional CLA may be declared generally binding by a Royal Decree (Roels, 2002).

For the recognition of competences according to a certificate of experience, the individual must only pay for the practical test plus a small fee. Many people are also entitled to a reduced rate or even exemption from payment. The cost of transport to and from the test centre is completely refunded. A declaration on ‘word-of-honour’ or a driving licence will suffice for this. The exploratory interview is free of charge for every applicant. The contribution to the practical test is adjusted according to the situation of the applicant:

- Unemployed people registered at VDAB and people in part-time compulsory education: free of charge;
- Self-employed people belonging to a disadvantaged group: EUR 25;
- Employees belonging to a disadvantaged group and the self-employed: EUR 50;
- Employees not belonging to a disadvantaged group: EUR 100. ‘Training vouchers’ may also be demanded for the test.

In practice, all test centres are currently providing the service free of charge.

3.4 Initiatives focused on specific target groups

The Flemish model of EVC is designed to be of equal relevance to a wide range of target groups, including not only those in mainstream employment and job seekers, but also the self employed, unqualified school leavers, immigrants and others. The guiding principles of the approach are non-discrimination, equal opportunities and societal integration.

The first level of recognition practices in integrating migrants is the recognition of acquired competences31. In 2003 DIVA- in the framework of the project ‘Recognition of Acquired Competences’ (EVC - Erkenning van Verworven Competenties) - subsidised a project for migrants, executed by the VDAB. Building on the Saïda project (career guidance for migrants), an instrument was developed with this project to measure the competences

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of migrants for three bottleneck occupations: maintenance electricians, residential electrotechnical fitters and electrotechnical industrial fitters.

The migrants’ competences are measured at starting practitioner level. The test is constructed in a language-independent, culture-independent manner. This means that a visual, schematic and resolutely practical approach is used. This EVC procedure improves the migrant’s chances of finding employment (ICEM, 2004).

The development of the certificate of vocational experience was informed by a vision to open up the labour market for disadvantaged groups (the low-skilled, i.e., with at best a secondary school-leaving certificate, the over-45s, people with disabilities and immigrant families) and thus reducing social inequality. The criteria for selecting occupations for which a certificate of experience is developed are, inter alia, the potential for access for disadvantaged groups (older people over 50 years of age, people with disabilities, immigrants, the low-skilled), the presence of bottleneck vacancies and a sufficiently large basis among the social partners. The intention here is to reach a mix of occupations, sectors and levels of ability. In 2009 almost 95 % of the people who participate in the procedure for a certificate for vocational experience, belong to one disadvantaged group.

3.5 Evidence of benefits to individuals

The stated aim of EVC in the Flemish Community is to help individuals to achieve personal development and increased integration into the labour market and society in general.

Experience certificates contribute to higher level of employment and to easing tensions on the labour market. They can allow individuals to enhance their employability, to move more easily from inactivity into work and to stay employable for longer. In Flanders EVC is also about improving access to formal education systems, shortening formal educational pathways and stimulating lifelong learning.

In 2009 the Department of Work launched a study on beneficiaries’ experience and the effect of a certificate for vocational experience through a survey with 320 candidates and 45 employers. Findings indicate that for the candidates, these certificates have an important subjective value. All the candidates say that these certificates mean a lot to them and that they grew in self-confidence, self-comprehension and pride. 70 % of the candidates say that they have improved their position on the labour market (although no statistics are available to support this statement), 90 % of the candidates would do the procedure again and as many candidates are promoting the procedure with friends and colleagues.

Experience certificates thus contribute to the attainment of a higher degree of employment and can ease tensions on the labour market. For employers, the certificates bring increased transparency and enable the matching of required skills with the talents of individuals. When new employees are being recruited, the experience certificates provide immediate confirmation of their professional competences. For existing employees, experience certificates may also prove to be useful for the optimum deployment and utilisation of talents within the company and for the development of a strategic training policy. The organisation of shorter training paths is cost-saving and it increases the chances of success. The experience certificate therefore further encourages companies to use a skills approach as a point of departure for their human resources policy.

4 QUALITY ASSURANCE AND EVALUATION

4.1 Quality Assurance Framework

A new Flemish Quality Agency coordinating quality assurance for all education, training and EVC systems

Within the perspective of the overarching Flemish qualification framework, it became logical to merge the following services into one central Agency: the Education and Training
Inspectorate, the Curriculum Development Service, database, NARIC, the coordination of EVC procedures and central examinations, and the secretariat of the EVC expertise network. A Decision of the Flemish Government on that topic was adopted on 20 February 2009.32

The idea behind the creation of this new agency was to have, in the long term, one QA system for educational and training pathways and RAC-procedures that lead to recognised qualifications in the Flemish qualifications structure.

The system is currently very fragmented as for instance the associations in the HE sector and the adult education centres have differences in their procedures, standards and methodologies in place. The vision that the government is developing is aiming to move towards more integration of the procedures in place in education and training33. Through the EVC-kennisnetwerk, expertise on EVC is shared between the different providers of EVC.

Responsibility for the quality assurance of certificates in the sports sector lies with BLOSO. This is taken as a given for the sports staff training courses organised by the VTS (De Vlaamse Trainersschool). As for the obligatory refresher courses, BLOSO/VTS recognises only those courses organised by the VTS partners. Further training can also be recognised for specific target groups (sports officials, lifeguards, club committee members, etc) that are organised by Instituut voor Sportbeheer (ISB), the Vlaamse Reddings Centrale (VRC), Belgisch Olympisch en Interfederaal Comité (BOIC), Sportac and the accredited sport medical examination centres.

4.2 Quality assurance systems / procedures

In the Higher Education sector, each association is responsible for quality assurance regarding EVC with respect to the following criteria: transparency, reliability and regularity of the procedures and methodology adopted.

Quality assurance for the certificate of vocational experience involves a number of different components. A first component is an unambiguous and uniform standard in which clear guidelines are connected to the assessment. For the choice of test centre, a number of general criteria are used such as a quality label, the expertise of the test centre and the presence of two assessors. These general criteria are supplemented by specific criteria depending on the certificate of experience to be obtained. Specific criteria include evaluation of expertise in the occupation, assessment of competences, an appropriate assessment procedure and so forth34. Since 2009 assessment centres are obliged to obtain a validation of their assessment methodology and tool. Experts and peers examine if the tool is reliable, trustworthy and conforms with the standard for the occupation (as defined by SERV and social partners). Once a validated tool for a specific occupation exists, new assessment centres for the same occupation are obliged to use the validated tool. This procedure guarantees the same assessment, no matter to which assessment centre a candidate goes.

According to the strategy on EVC in socio-cultural education, quality assurance is regarded as an important condition for the legitimacy of an EVC system. Since the decree requires the socio-cultural adult education organisation to work according to the principles of integral quality assurance, recognition of the decree is sufficient to show that the organisation is operating in a qualitatively acceptable manner. In that sense, it may be assumed that the training offered will also be of a qualitatively acceptable nature. However, the government cannot as yet be the guarantor for the training certificates issued in the socio-cultural sector. It is left to the discretion of training providers as to whether they issue learning certificates or not. This applies for the accredited training providers, where there is a degree

32 National Report 2009 of the Flemish Community (Belgium) “Education and Training 2010”
33 Interview with Department for Education and Training
of control, as well as non-accredited training providers. Nor is the Government able to guarantee the quality of certifications delivered in youth work.

The strategy on EVC in socio-cultural education makes a number of recommendations in the context of issuing competence certificates. These include for example, “if an organisation issues competence certificates it must further be able to demonstrate that the procedures and instruments used score positively with regard to reliability (…) and validity (…). Non-accredited or non-subsidised organisations must first undergo an audit procedure (conducted by an external agency) to show that they operate to a high quality standard”.

4.3 Evaluation framework

In the decree for the introduction of a number of measures for the restructuring and ‘flexibilisation’ of higher education in Flanders, the Flemish Government was made responsible for a five-year evaluation of how the associations and institutions attend to the quality assurance of their EVC procedures and their dispensation procedures. The Flemish Government develops the necessary measures for implementation. Quality assurance relates to the transparency, accessibility and regularity of applied procedures and methods (Vlaamse Overheid, 2006).

The first evaluation of the EVC procedures has taken place; the associations delivered a report on 30 March 2009 and the concluding report was finalised by the government in 2010.

The Department of Work evaluates each year the policy and figures concerning the certificate for vocational experience.

5 ASSESSMENT METHODS

5.1 Methods used

There are several procedures for recognition in the various domains (economic/labour market, social and higher education).

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning arrangements in higher education:

It is possible to have competences gained through professional and personal experiences in higher education (EVC – Erkenning van Verworven Competenties). Responsibility for this type of recognition falls under one of the five associations and not under HEIs. The associations have to set up a recognition service and define a procedure. Nevertheless, they are free to establish their own arrangements (centralised or decentralised organisation, application receivable all along the year or at fixed periods, etc.). They only have to respect two restrictions introduced in the decree: to define a regulation offering methodological and procedural guarantees to the candidate and to respect minimum rules concerning standards, methodology, procedure and quality assurance. Moreover, all associations propose a four-phase procedure: 1) information and guidance, 2) identification of the elements of competences gained through experience, 3) assessment and 4) recognition. The methods of identification of learning outcomes are common and are used according to various configurations: structured interview, observation in situation, collection of information and evidence, interpretation of data, portfolio. Nevertheless, associations nowadays give greater importance to portfolios. The decision essentially lies on the following assessment criteria: authenticity (is the evidence a proof of the applicant’s performance?), topicality (does the evidence reflect the applicant’s current competence

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Validation of vocational experience:
The arrangements set up by the Department of Work essentially aim at the recognition of non-formal and informal learning through the certificate for vocational experience. The authorisation to perform assessment procedures for ‘Titels van Beroepsbekwaamheid’ is given by the Ministry.

The procedure identifies three main tools for assessment:

- **A portfolio** (‘portfoliobeoordeling’). This is an important step, but it is not compulsory. It consists of a detailed CV that must establish a link between the experience acquired by the applicant at work and the key competences identified by the standard. In fact it constitutes, prior to the assessment process, a means for applicants to foresee their chances to be successful in the final assessment and to decide if they should continue or not.

- **Observation in situation** either reconstituted or simulated (‘praktijkassessment’). Applicants must demonstrate that they are able to perform all the tasks described in the standard. There is no partial recognition. If applicants cannot demonstrate all the competences stipulated by the standard, they are encouraged to reinforce them or to widen their professional experience. They can apply maximum twice in a year, so when they have acquired the required competences (at work or in training sessions) they can come back to the assessment centre.

- **Observation in real situations**. This is only the case for the profession of nursery nurse.

The evaluation is conducted by two assessors. They both fill out a grid separately and compare results at the end. The test takes generally about one day (4-8 hours).

### 5.2 Advantages and disadvantages of the methods used

In its current state of development, recognition of non-formal and informal learning arrangements appear more to rely on a summative logic than on a formative one. The ‘recognition of acquired competences’ (EVC) process seems to be based on a ‘weighing’ logic of identification and traditional evaluation leading to exemptions of (parts of) study programmes. Some initiatives, particularly in the socio-cultural sector, seem to demonstrate that it is possible to insert the process in a developmental logic, mobilising EVC as an instrument for organising and managing personal and professional pathways.

Although the founding texts recognise the right of every citizen to benefit from guidance services for his/her career, this service is not yet efficient and the recognition of acquired competences is not identified explicitly as a key element in this perspective. A developmental approach calls for a holistic vision of experiential learning. It requires taking into account the learning outcomes in an articulated manner, this means that we have to surpass the specific assessment methods in use today in every sector. It is the responsibility of the ministerial departments to create the conditions for access to this new culture in the learning and training institutions that they supervise and to lead the change.

The challenge for the assessment procedures in higher education is in the first place a **harmonisation of the different methods and standards used by the associations**. At present they vary according to the associations – the aforementioned study notes that in

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practice, there are large inter-institutional differences between, but also within institutions. This means that students eligible for a proficiency certificate for acquired skills and for a reduction of study duration will have the impression that they can ‘shop around’ between the various associations.\textsuperscript{39}

In 2006, the Decree on the establishment of measures for restructuring and flexibility in higher education simplified and improved the procedures for recognition of prior learning. The outcomes (access to higher education programmes, shortening of study duration) and the basic methodology outlined above remain the same. The system of appeals against the decisions of the validation agency has also been improved. However, there remain several issues to be addressed. We have already noted that there are significant differences in the procedures in place which may lead to students ‘shopping around’. A critical issue for many institutions is that not all curricula have been fully developed in terms of competences. For the associations, the time investment of staff is high and no additional resources have been made available by the Department of Education so the extra work has to be taken up by existing staff. It is felt that EVC is promoted on the one hand but not financially supported on the other – which affects its acceptance at institutional level.\textsuperscript{40}

6 VALIDATION PRACTITIONERS

6.1 Profile of validation practitioners

The law determines that EVC assessors in higher education must be evaluation experts (i.e. they must have a minimum of one year’s experience in assessment and must be an expert in the occupation they are assessing) and are not permitted to combine the assessment activity with the actual guidance and support of the applicant. Students are entitled to request support during their EVC application and for feedback at the end of the procedure.

In most cases the assessment is carried out by a jury of at least two assessors in higher education. However the organisation/appointment of juries/assessors varies depending on the Association. For instance Ghent has two independent assessors.\textsuperscript{41} Basic information is available from the associations’ websites and also on the website of the Flemish department of Education. In the case of the two associations in the above study (KULeuven and UGent) they can also refer to the guides on EVC prepared by the institutions, or the relevant information incorporated into the institutions’ general study guides. Students also have access to competence maps (where available) for the curriculum they pursue. A general brochure on EVC is currently being prepared by the Department of Education.

For the certificate for vocational experience, the law (decree 30/4/2004 and decision Flemish government 23/09/2005) determines that the assessors must be evaluation experts, with minimum one year experience in assessment, but also an expert in the occupation they are assessing.

6.2 Provision of training and support to practitioners

The Decree on flexibilisation of higher education (April 30th, 2004) describes some of the aspects of an EVC procedure. Although the decree prescribes a five-year evaluation of how the associations attend to the quality assurance of EVC-procedures, the government does not determine how and which quality standards the associations should meet.

The associations organise by themselves in-house training and they provide in-house support to validation practitioners. There is not an external formal organisation or framework for professionalising validation practitioners in higher education. The institutions

\textsuperscript{39} Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007. Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

\textsuperscript{40} de Craene, B., An Exploratory Study of the Formal Recognition of Prior Learning Experiences in the Context of Flemish Higher Education, Sense Publishers

\textsuperscript{41} Study on formal recognition of non-formal and informal learning, Nuffic, November 2008
for adult education in Flanders have their own individual EVC procedures; training of validation practitioners in these institutions is not yet been foreseen.

The legislation concerning the certificate for vocational experience also obliges assessment centres to organise training for their employees who offer guidance and for their assessors.

6.3 Qualifications requirements

In higher education there are no qualifications requirements for validation practitioners determined by the government. As noted above, for the certificate for vocational experience, assessors must be evaluation experts, with minimum one year experience in assessment, but also an expert in the occupation they are assessing.
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Stakeholders consulted:

Department of Education and Training

Department of Work

Department of Culture, Youth, Sports and Media

Association University of Ghent