European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning 2010

Case Study: The Philips Vocational qualifications programme, The Netherlands

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Vocational Qualifications Programme (VQP) (CV in Dutch) is a joint initiative of Philips Electronics Nederland and four trade unions. The project is targeted at employees who are skilled in their current trade but who do not have formal qualifications. VQP is a private sector initiative which for the first two years (2004-2006) was funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) and later financed by the company itself.

The programme was introduced when Philips Electronics Nederland was transforming its business model in the country from mass manufacturing to smaller competency centres and moving much of its manufacturing work to lower-wage countries. An overall goal of the project was therefore to increase employees' knowledge and skills, thereby also improving their flexibility, deployability and overall opportunities on the labour market.

This case study provides insights into the:

- Dual vocational qualification training methods which take into account the validation of non-formal and informal learning, gained by the individual through their work experience;
- ‘Combi’ module approach, whereby Philips staff receive intensive training during working hours without this resulting in any loss of production capacity;
- Evidence that both individual employees and the companies benefit from the VQP;
- Evidence that validation of non-formal and informal learning can be used by an employer in a preventive approach to redundancies, working to improve the potential of its employees to be deployed elsewhere.

The programme is implemented by the Phillips Employability Centre, which is part of Phillips Human Resources Netherlands. VQP training programmes were set up in each production unit of the company branches in the Netherlands.

Since 2004, the project has been anchored in the Philips Collective Labour Agreement (CAO). Over the years the aim remained the same - to help as many experienced but unqualified production workers as possible to gain a sector recognised diploma. By mid-2010, more than 1,500 employees had gained a diploma or certificate that brought them up to a basic qualification level or above.

2 RATIONALE AND BACKGROUND

The foundations for the VQP programme were set in the early 1990s, when the Philips Employment Scheme (werkgelegenheidsplan, WGP) for the long-term unemployed was introduced. Many hundreds of long-term unemployed people have been trained for nationally recognised diplomas via the WGP and the Programme is now considered among the most successful employment projects in the Netherlands. The combination of work experience relevant to the labour market and nationally recognised training has been identified as its 'success formula'.

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Philips line managers realised that the programme, which was working well for the unskilled unemployed, might work well for Philips’ low-qualified employees, with skills in their trade but lacking formal qualifications to prove these. Some elements of the WGP were therefore adopted to help meet Philips’ need for better-trained staff. A so-called ‘Combi-model’ was developed, whereby participants of WGP (initially unskilled long-term unemployed, but at the time participating in WGP’s training) temporarily take the places of Phillips employees undergoing training.

Later, Philips and the trade unions agreed to give priority to what became known as a ‘Work-to-Work’ approach for redundant older employees aged 40+ with limited opportunities on the regional labour market. The trade unions took the Philips WGP in general and the Combi-model in particular to blend into their new approach. For both the unions and for the employees involved, this required a considerable change of attitude, which meant letting go of the usual entitlement to redundancy payments, for example. Yet a large proportion of staff did eventually choose to take part in the programme, rather than receive redundancy payments, thereby marking the launch of the first ‘Work-to-Work’ scheme in the Netherlands (referred to as the ‘Terneuzen’ model).

The progression from ‘Work-to-Work’ to the Vocational Qualification Programme marked ‘a switch from curative to preventive policy’. Whereas the WGP participants and those Philips staff involved in reorganisations received market-oriented training via the ‘Terneuzen model’ with the sole aim of increasing their opportunities on the external labour market, the goal of the VQP was to train Philips staff in such a way that they are able to match changing skill and knowledge requirements from within the company as well as the demands of the external labour market. This was of ultimate importance for Phillips at that time, since the relocation of manual production work to Poland had led to a dramatic fall in the demand for simple manual labour. Before unskilled staff could be transferred to other mechanised departments, they would need to be trained as skilled operators. A standard vocational training course was not an option due to the amount of time involved. Line managers and the trade unions therefore came up with the ‘Combi-model’, whereby participants of WGP temporarily take the place of employees undergoing training within the VQP programme, an approach whereby Philips staff could receive an intensive training during working hours without this resulting in any loss of production capacity, because WGP participants also needed to gain work experience as part of their training as a basic-level or skilled operator. This was beneficial for several reasons:

- for employees - better opportunities on the labour market and career prospects;
- for trade unions and regional government – greater job security prospects for low-qualified people and therefore lower unemployment rates in the region;
- and for the company – to exercise their corporate social responsibility and to be able to offer something more than redundancy payments for their employees.

Since 2004 around 1500 participants of VQP have gained formal certificates evidencing their skills. The VQP has evolved over the years and now focuses on the low-qualified, people with low literacy and early drop-outs of the formal education system.

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3 For more information on the Combi-model please refer to ANNEX 2: Operational steps in Combi-model.

3 AIMS, OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES

An overall aim of the VQP initiative was to train Philips Electronics Nederland staff to enable them to meet the changing skills and knowledge requirements both within the company and also of the external labour market. The project objectives included:

- to take a preventive approach to redundancies by working to improve the potential of Philips employees to be deployed elsewhere;
- to enable participants to gain qualifications and/or access to new labour market opportunities;
- to bring employees up to basic qualification (WEB2/WEB3) level;
- to take into account employees’ non-formal learning achievements that they have gained through their working experience;
- to offer alternatives for those who are not able to acquire a basic level qualification.

VQP aimed to bring low-skilled and/or low-qualified employees (mainly production and logistics workers) without any formal professional and educational qualifications up to the basic qualification (WEB2 or WEB3) level which is generally accepted in the Netherlands as the minimum requirement to be able to operate effectively in a rapidly changing labour market. However, it was not realistic to expect all participants to achieve WEB2 or WEB3 level even with extra support from preparatory courses and adapted learning programmes and methods. Thus, since 2008 special attention has been given by the company to low-qualified support staff and older employees without any formal professional qualifications who were not yet in training (including secretaries and administrative staff), by in addition offering them new training courses called “Learning Works” workshops ('Logistics' and 'Assistant Operator within Production Technology', the latter having been especially designed for assembly workers) and job-oriented training towards relevant modular certificates. Regardless of the learning path selected, they both are based on recognition of on-the-job learning. In recent years, almost 400 employees in total have participated in the ‘Learning Works’ workshops with around 75% of them later exploring possibilities to enter further training programmes. Since 2009, the VQP has also been focusing on people with low literacy skills.

4 IMPLEMENTATION

Within the Philips Employability Centre, the national project leader of the Vocational Qualification Programme is responsible for implementing the project within the agreed CAO framework. In 2004, local VQP training programmes were set up in each production unit, all under the umbrella of the VQP training scheme at national level. Although the Programme is a nationwide Philips project, its implementation is not identical in every Philips company. The national framework offers sufficient scope for variations in interpretation depending on the local situation, culture, training needs and training infrastructure.

In the VQP training plan, a determined choice was made for sector-recognised, dual training courses (i.e. a combination of theory and practice where at least 60% of the time is devoted to practical assignments) in the processing, metalwork and logistics industries, the main reasons being that these courses:

- are attuned to the work processes in various Philips companies;
- are quick to respond to changes in the market/changes in market demand;
- are based on the already proven combination of theory and practical assignments;
- are modular in format, making it possible to continue studying at higher levels on a step-by-step basis;
- offer opportunities for Open Learning and shortened training schedules;
- lead to the award of diplomas that are widely recognised and highly valued on the labour market.

Concerning the process, prior to the training phase candidates with at least two or three years of work experience are invited to participate in an assessment of prior learning (APL) to find out whether they have already acquired competences which meet the requirements to proceed directly to a formal training course. This assessment produces a reliable overview of the competences the employee has already acquired. How and where they were acquired (at work or otherwise) is not considered relevant.

The outcome of the APL procedure is then used as the basis for an individual tailoring of the teaching programme. If the employee’s knowledge, experience and/or skills meet a certain set of requirements, they are awarded an officially recognised certificate or diploma straight away. Should they then decide to undertake further training, they will be granted exemption from those parts of the training for which they have already qualified. This shortens the overall duration of training courses, making them more tailor-made to the actual learner’s needs.

By 2009 70 % of the 3,000 or so direct employees of Philips Electronics Netherlands (this number is lower in comparison to earlier years due to the partial or total disposal of a number of business units since then) had either already undergone training or were currently in training. From this year on the company has therefore focused on low-skilled older (40+) employees not yet in training, where increased attention is paid to motivational and behavioural issues during the preparatory phase.

‘Learning Works’ workshops were developed especially for people with no professional qualifications and yet not in training. The aim of the workshop was to encourage participants to think about themselves and their future and to help them to realise that training can improve their position in the labour market. In the period from the start of VQP in 2004 to the end of June 2010, more than 400 people have attended the workshop so far. Around 75 % of the participants decided afterwards to embark on further training. The remaining 25 % decided not to, for a variety of reasons.

The ‘Learning Works’ workshops take place over five half-day sessions. At some point participants take part in an individual interview with a trainer and three months after completion of the workshop a reunion meeting is held. Considerable attention is devoted to questions such as ‘who am I?’, ‘what am I good at?’ and ‘what do I want to achieve?’. Participants are also given practical information about training opportunities, the local labour market and developments in that market. The programme aims to be of an interactive, active and light-hearted nature. Participants are asked to gather information for themselves about trades, companies or courses that appeal to them. During the last session of the workshop, participants draw up a personal plan of action. With the help of a supervisor, they identify the concrete steps they have already taken and plan to take in the future. For instance, the results from the first six ‘Learning Works’ workshops (with a total of 60 participants) were very positive: six participants underwent an APL assessment straight away, four took up training in the process industry, nine underwent retraining to become lorry drivers or forklift truck drivers and sixteen followed courses ranging from pedicure to systems operator training. A quarter of the participating employees (15) finally decided against training for various reasons but overall, the majority of the participants responded to the workshop with enthusiasm. They were pleased to have found out more about themselves and their future prospects - and what they could do to exploit the opportunities open to them. 400 participants have already attended these workshops before June 2010.
Since the first six workshops were run, a number of Philips companies have now adopted the ‘Learning Works’ approach for themselves.

5 STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

As noted previously, the VQP was developed as a joint initiative of Philips Electronics Nederland and four trade unions as a response to a planned reorganisation of Philips Electronics’ business model and operation in the Netherlands. It was first incorporated into a Collective Labour Agreement (CAO) in 2004. But, as described above, the Programme’s foundations had actually been laid a long time before that in the other Philips initiatives (i.e., WGB, and ‘Work-to-Work’), which were also jointly developed between the company and trade unions. Therefore the initiative is deeply rooted in a process of cooperation with stakeholders / interested parties. On the other hand, the success of training projects such as VQP depends heavily on the support of employees, their representing bodies and the company’s management. Close cooperation with line managers and the company’s management enables this to work in practical terms. Overall, stakeholder involvement makes the outcome of the validation practice and training more relevant to the continually changing labour market and more ‘trusted’ and respected among stakeholders including other employers, which is an ultimate goal of the initiative. In addition local government bodies and the UWV (Dutch benefits agency) are said to be pleased with the outcomes of the programme. The initiative is also supported by the Ministry for Social Affairs and Employment.

6 RESULTS, OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

So far the company has prepared three result reports which provide both quantitative and qualitative data. Two of these reports are available from the Philips website. In addition, doctoral research is being undertaken by the University of Maastricht at the moment and early results are expected to be available in 2011.

In relation to the total number of participants, 1,508 employees had gained a diploma between February 2004 and June 2010 with further 400 in training and around 200 people due to commence training in the second half of 2010. The Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) method was used in 22.5% of all cases in 2009 (40.8% in 2008; the lower percentage of APL in 2009 can be explained by the changing composition of those commencing training, such as age, prior educational achievements, work experience, motivation etc.).

The division between men and women was 75.3% and 24.7% respectively (this is related to the overall number of women in production jobs which is much lower). In terms of age groups, until 2008 over half of the participants were aged between 31 and 40, whereas in 2008 the largest group comprised those aged between 41 and 50. The same trend remained for 2009 - June 2010: 24.5% and 52.6% respectively. In addition there was a considerable increase in the number of participants aged 50 and above - from 4% of the total of participants in December 2007 to 16.9% in December 2008 and 19.0% in June 2010. According to the Philips 2008 annual report, “it would appear that at the start of the project the older employees were more cautious, but later they were making up for lost time. It is understandable that this group was more hesitant initially. Most of them haven’t done any training for a very long time, so embarking on a new training programme was an

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5 For more information please refer to Section 2. Aims, Objectives and Activities of this document.
even bigger step for them than for the rest.\textsuperscript{6} In December 2008 the age distribution was as follows: under 23 - 0.9%; 23 - 30 - 5.7%; 31 - 40 - 29.4%; 41 - 50 - 47.1% and older than 50 - 16.9% and in June 2010: 0.6 %, 3.3 %, 24.5 %, 52.6 % and 19.0 % respectively. The youngest participant to date was aged 19 and the oldest was 63 years old. The average age in 2009/2010 was 43.5 (compared to 39 in the period 2004-2007 and 42.8 in 2008).\textsuperscript{7}

VQP fulfilled its expectations in that over 90.8 % of the project's participants belonged to the target group, namely employees without basic qualifications (i.e. formal basic qualification of level WEB-2\textsuperscript{6}): with education lower than WEB-1 - 75.1 %, WEB-1 - 15.7 %, WEB-2 - 7.6 %, and higher than WEB-2 - 1.6 %.

Over 80% of all training courses taken were in process technology, followed by (assistant) skilled production worker courses. This trend remained in 2008, however there was a growth in the ‘Logistics Worker’ course and courses in ‘Industrial Electronics’ and ‘Mechatronics’. In 2008 the first diplomas were awarded for the new tailor-made course ‘Assistant Operator within Production Technology’.

In respect to the level of the courses followed, courses at WEB-1 level (i.e. Basic Operator) are becoming less popular (they represented just 12.2% in 2008 and even less – 9.7% in 2008). Most of the courses now being followed (46.2% in 2009/2010) are at higher (WEB-2) level, and WEB-3 courses are also becoming more popular (44.1% in 2009/2010).

As noted previously, the ‘Learning Works’ workshop also delivered reasonably good results: 75 % of the 400 participants before June 2010 have decided to follow one or another training pathway. Some of them opted for retraining - to become a lorry driver, a pedicurist, a security officer or a systems operator for example. Others chose to do extra training in their existing trade.

Qualitative evidence suggests an overall satisfaction with the VQP, as evidence by the quotes below, which are taken from the 2007, 2008 and 2009/2010 VQP reports:

\begin{quote}
"You don’t have to learn again what you already know\textsuperscript{8}: real customisation"
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
"Surprised how much I recognised of myself in the outcome\textsuperscript{8}\"
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
"I never felt any hesitation at all about doing the APL assessment. I liked the fact that there’s room in your portfolio for more than just formal school diplomas. You can also include other sorts of experience. For example, I put down my voluntary work as an IT specialist for the social youth work project, and I mentioned that I’m an amateur radio operator. The assessment lasted two and a half hours. It covered all sorts of things – language skills, spatial awareness, learning capacity, the will to learn... I was surprised how much I recognised of myself in the outcome. It was definitely a good basis for the development plan they drew up for me."
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
"And I like the way they take your own job as the point of departure. Now that I know more about the background to my work and the process, I can appreciate much better what I’m actually doing and that helps me to keep a more careful eye on things like quality, safety and the environment."
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
"Individuals’ self-confidence grows, they discover that learning can be fun and they gain a better understanding of the organisation as a whole, which in turn increases their sense of commitment."
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{7} Grow with Philips - A peek behind the scenes of Vocational Qualification Programme and Philips Employment Scheme 2009-2010, Philips, 2010.
\textsuperscript{8} More information on vocational education levels is provided in ANNEX 1. Levels of adult and vocational education in the Netherlands.
In broader terms, the individual employee increases his/her value on the internal and external labour market by gaining a recognised diploma, and the company benefits by having staff who are more widely deployable. For society as a whole, VQP has proved an effective weapon in the fight to overcome social exclusion, unemployment and sometimes self-perceived divides between those with high and low level of education.

The Programme is already well-known, respected and trusted at the national level, having gained several awards from the government, but most importantly the achieved results can already speak for themselves and are appreciated both by the participants and other employers. More organisations outside Philips also adopting the VQP approach for providing LLL opportunities to their employees. As a good practice example it is already recognised at the European level with Cedefop organised study visits of EU national experts and practitioners in the field wishing to learn more about certain practical implementation aspects of the Programme.

7 SUCCESS FACTORS

In addition to the factors already outlined in Section 4 (e.g. tailor-made solutions, competence-oriented training, Combi-model\(^8\), flexibility and support according to individual circumstances etc.), these are some of the success factors of the Programme:

- broad stakeholder engagement and support – enables smooth implementation of the programme and increases credibility and reputation of the scheme;
- customisation of approaches – creates better opportunities for individual learning and career progression needs and therefore entices more workers to participate in the programme;
- APL assessment is available for employees with a minimum of two to three years of work experience - successful applicants can further proceed towards an abridged training courses;
- providing additional support and opportunities for more ‘difficult’ target groups - such as low-qualified, low-skilled, early school leavers, older, not-in-training employees, people with low literacy skills etc. – in some cases possibilities provided by Philips are among the few they are offered to facilitate their employability and career progression and ultimately social inclusion;
- creativity – is important for attracting potential learners from more ‘vulnerable’ target groups for motivating and keeping them interested throughout the entire training process;
- special provisions in collective labour agreements – ensure commitment to training and HR development even in times of economic recession;
- attention to informal and non-formal learning – as an alternative to formal education, which does not suit to everyone.

Overall, the programme has provided valuable insights and experience that is already used for other initiatives in the field, for example, the Pilip project\(^10\), aiming to develop an ‘online toolbox’ for stimulating, facilitating and validating informal learning in organisations.

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\(^8\) For more information please refer to Annex 2: Operational Steps in Combi Model.

\(^10\) For more information please refer to [www.informallearning.net](http://www.informallearning.net).
8 CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED AND LESSONS LEARNED

Some of the lessons learned to date are described below:

- It is important to develop training initiatives in times of economic security, in order to ensure that the employability of employees is embedded within the structure of organisation;
- The adopted Combi-approach demonstrated that it was possible to provide permanent employees with vocational training during working hours without disrupting the production process;
- It is important to provide ‘spaces’ for reflection and learning over the course of project implementation – that way projects can be tailored to changing circumstances and needs;
- Initiatives that take place within one company can have wider benefits for the local and national economy. Local government bodies and the UWV (Dutch benefits agency) were pleased with the new means of combating long-term unemployment and especially with a good practice example for other companies;
- It is sometimes necessary to search for ways of making training relevant to ‘difficult’ target groups, e.g. those employees who are not going to acquire a vocational diploma without some extra support and effort. This was overcome in the VQP by building up a clear picture of why they have not participated in vocational training up to now and finding ways of motivating them to take that step. It also meant looking for creative training programmes geared towards the target group;
- Initiatives should build on what is relevant for the labour market;
- The whole organisation has to adapt, as in the case of the VQP for example some training programmes took place partly during work time and participants were given the time and help they needed to gather information while at work;
- Good coaching throughout the entire process is a key for personal success;
- Being an organisation that truly believes in its workers and puts considerable effort into improving their qualifications and career prospects pays off in the longer term.

9 CONCLUSIONS

There are many lessons to be learned from the Philips VQP. The programme provides evidence of the fact that companies must improve the deployability and flexibility of their staff. Individual employees clearly benefit from VQP but so do the companies. And this is not only about the astute management and optimal exploitation of human capital. However, often companies do not see the benefits of investing in people even at so called ‘good times’, not to mention during an economic downturn. What the VQP case shows is that companies need to act preventively and build up their capacity ready for when the economy picks up again, in order to gain a competitive advantage. What appeals most in the case of VQP is that the company gives people the opportunity to develop in the direction that suits them best, whether or not their future lies within Philips.

The focus on employees without formal vocational qualifications and the commitment to providing tailored-made tools and solutions is another strength of this case study. The primary goal of the VQP programme was to increase employees’ knowledge and skills, thereby also improving their opportunities on the labour market, but considerable outcomes
are also achieved in terms of raising people’s self-esteem and confidence and taking full responsibility for the situation in the regional and ultimately national economy.

The VQP programme has enabled Philips to accumulate expertise in designing training approaches suitable for low-skilled adult learners, who in some cases have very little motivation for any training. The company’s programmes and products aim to close the ‘gap’ between learning and working by fostering a learning culture, centred not around the system but on the individual and his/her learning outcomes.

It seems that the employees are in particular happy with the possibility to validate their non-formal (gained through work experience) learning achievements as part of their training pathway. In respect to quality and reliability of the approach, this is seen through its results and popularity among other employees in the labour market. Among the most important factors of success of this and other training initiatives seems to be close cooperation among interested parties and training approaches which are embedded within the company’s core business operations.

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Comments to this report were provided by Mr. Frank Visser, national CV project leader Vocational Qualification Programme (CV), Employability Center Philips Electronics Netherlands; December 2010.

Literature:

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Grow with Philips - A peek behind the scenes of Vocational Qualification Programme and Philips Employment Scheme 2009-2010, Philips, 2010
ANNEX 1. LEVELS OF ADULT AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN THE NETHERLANDS

Dutch intermediate vocational education identifies four levels of professional competence. The various WEB levels (WEB = Adult and Vocational Education Act) are:

- Assistant training (level 1)
- Basic vocational training (level 2)
- Vocational training (level 3)
- Middle management and specialist training (level 4)

Level 2 is referred to as ‘basic’ because it is generally accepted to be the minimum needed to be able to perform adequately and survive in today’s rapidly changing labour market.
ANNEX 2. OPERATIONAL STEPS IN COMBI-MODEL

The ‘Combi-model’ was created by linking the Philips Employment Scheme (WGP), that trains unskilled long-term unemployed workers’ intake with VQP. In this way a new unique approach was developed whereby both workers and jobseekers receive supervision and training. By giving workers time off to go for training, great opportunities open up for jobseekers to gain work experience and undergo vocational training at the same time as well. In concrete terms, it means that WGP-ers who need to gain practical experience as part of their training as operators or logistics workers can temporarily fill in places of the Philips employees on training, thereby reducing the loss of capacity. It serves two purposes: the company’s experienced workers can gain an officially recognised diploma whilst jobseekers can gain relevant training and work experience.

The basic Combi-model comprises the following six steps:

1) the long-term unemployed person undergoes four to six months of vocational training;
2) once the participant has gained his theory certificate, he/she spends four months working alongside an experienced operator to gain practical experience;
3) at the end of those four months, the operator embarks on his own vocational training course;
4) his/her place is temporarily occupied by the job seeker;
5) the operator obtains his vocational diploma and is now more widely deployable;
6) the job seeker obtains a diploma and has gained work experience: they are now ready to move into regular employment, either within Philips or elsewhere.

Variations

In practice, the precise form the Combi-approach takes is often a bit different. For example, instead of a job seeker replacing an experienced operator on a one-to-one basis, there is an increasing trend towards placing a job seeker in a department or team in which a number of operators are undergoing training. The extra capacity supplied by that one job seeker is then used to free up several operators to undergo training during working hours.

The reasons behind the tendency to opt for the above alternative include rising production pressure and the scarcity of motivated job seekers. The latter has also led to adjustments to the preparatory phase (step 1) - it has proved necessary to devote increasing attention to motivational and behavioural issues (attitude to work, discipline, independence) in order to facilitate a smooth transition onto the shop floor.