



European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014

Country report Belgium (NL)

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1 Introduction

In Belgium, the responsibility for lifelong learning is shared between the Communities (Flemish, French-speaking and German-speaking), the Regions (Flemish Region or Flanders, Walloon Region or Wallonia and Brussels-Capital Region) and the social partners.

In Flanders, the term 'EVC' (*Erkennen van Verworven Competenties - recognition of acquired competences, RAC*) is used to refer to the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The practices around RAC in the different sectors have not changed substantially since 2010¹. RAC can be used to get admission to an education and training programme, to request exemptions from (parts of) the study programme and to obtain a work experience certificate. RAC is a matter of policy in different sectors and the arrangements in these sectors differ.

However, driven by the need to address the existing fragmentation with regard to practices and terminology, new developments are currently taking place at policy level aiming at an integrated approach towards RAC. The main change concerns an increased cooperation between the sectors of education, work, culture, youth and sports and the willingness to create a single framework linking the validation processes to the Flemish Qualifications Structure (VKS/NQF). A concrete step in the development of an integrated policy was the approval in 2009 of the NQF and its subsequent implementation. The NQF describes eight levels of qualifications that can be obtained through formal, informal or non-formal learning. It aims at clarifying qualifications and the way they are related to each other as well as at optimising the communication about qualifications. All recognised qualifications are systematically being classified in the NQF². In time, this NQF will serve as the reference to develop procedures for the RAC. It will be possible to obtain a qualification by means of a RAC procedure, which, as a consequence will raise the visibility and civil effect of the qualification certificates, acquired through RAC.

2 National perspective on validation

2.1 National legal framework, system or policy on validation

The issue of validation of non-formal and informal learning has been well-established for almost a decade on the public policy agenda in Belgium, where initiatives had been developed in the context of a wider drive to improve access to Lifelong Learning. Formal legal frameworks for validation have been put in place in both the French and Flemish speaking parts of the country.

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. 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 system.

Moreover, the Federal Government must decide which categories of employees have the right to follow a validation procedure during working hours 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 end³. As

¹ As described in: Cecile Mathou, 'EU Inventory on Validation of non-formal and informal learning 2010. Country Report Belgium (Flanders). European Commission, DG Education and Culture and Cedefop.

²² [http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/kwalificatiestructuur/links-en-publicaties/bijlagen/Brochure-Developed-Approved-Implemented-\(En\)-12-2012.pdf](http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/kwalificatiestructuur/links-en-publicaties/bijlagen/Brochure-Developed-Approved-Implemented-(En)-12-2012.pdf)

³ Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium).

explained in the previous EU Inventory report for Flanders⁴, at the end of 2006 a decree was introduced⁵ which integrated the RAC into the right to paid training leave⁶.

The current system of multiple frameworks on validation

Currently, in Flanders there are several frameworks in place covering the RAC in different sectors. More specifically, the different sectors have the following validation policy in place:

Department of Education and Training

1. Secondary education

Those who wish to obtain the diploma or certificate of secondary education at a later stage can take an exam at the Exam Committee⁷. This is possible for a selection of educational programmes offered in secondary education⁸. Exams are being organised all the year around.

2. Higher Education

As described in the 2010 EU Inventory report⁹, RAC in higher education is defined by the Decree on making higher education more flexible (30 April 2004). The process of recognising non-formal and informal learning has been in place in universities and university colleges since September 2005.

This system is decentralised with each association¹⁰ in higher education elaborating their own rules of procedure. The procedures result in a proof of acquired competences (or in Dutch 'bewijs van bekwaamheid') which can then lead to the appropriate exemptions/shortened study duration and credit certificates and/or a proof of qualification. RAC in this sector can be used to pursue education or for professional aims. For the latter however, the institutions cannot guarantee the acceptance by employers of the proof of competences.

The procedure refers to the level descriptors included in art. 58 §2 of the Parliament Act on Higher Education and the learning outcomes laid down by the higher education institutions. The procedure starts often from a portfolio and typically includes other elements such as assessments, structured interviews and behavioural observation.

Standard admission requirements for higher education in Flanders include a diploma of secondary education. There is no standard entrance exam, except for medicine and dentistry. For those who have not obtained a diploma of secondary education but are over 21 years old, education institutions offer a special 'entrance examination' ('toelatingsonderzoek'). If granted, the person can access higher education without a formal secondary education diploma. Even though the legislator had foreseen to bring this procedure under RAC, people representing higher education institutions argue that this should not be considered to be RAC. The reason for this is that the outcome is not a proof of competences, like for example a diploma of secondary education, but rather a proof that an individual has the potential to succeed in obtaining a higher education programme degree

⁴ Cecile Mathou, 'EU Inventory on Validation of non-formal and informal learning 2010. Country Report Belgium (Flanders). European Commission, DG Education and Culture and Cedefop.

⁵ Royal Decree of 10/11/2006.

⁶ In 1985, private-sector employees were given the right to paid training leave (Betaald Educatief Verlof) of up to 180 hours per academic year to undertake work-related training, providing certain basic conditions are met. The maximum number of hours was lowered to 120 in 2006. Public sector employees have a similar right to training leave, although subject to different rules. This is referred to as Opleidingsverlof.

⁷ <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/secundair/examencommissie>. Exceptionally, this system can also be used by (highly gifted) pupils to obtain a diploma quicker than foreseen.

⁸ I.e. General, Technical, Art and Vocational secondary education (ASO, TSO, KSO, BSO).

⁹ Cecile Mathou, 'EU Inventory on Validation of non-formal and informal learning 2010. Country Report Belgium (Flanders). European Commission, DG Education and Culture and Cedefop.

¹⁰ An **association** is an official entity regulating the cooperation of a **university** and one or more **university colleges**.

even though he or she has not finished secondary education. At the moment, the procedures for the entrance examination are being aligned between the different associations in the higher education sector¹¹.

3. Adult education

In the Flemish Decree of 15 June 2007 relating to (formal) adult education, exemptions linked to the modular organisation of educational programmes are defined. All programmes (i.e. modules) in the centres for adult education are developed based on course profiles approved by the Flemish Government. This implies that all (modular) certificates are mutually interchangeable. The centres for adult education provide an evaluation for each module. Each centre has a code of conduct that defines the procedures for exemption and disputes of evaluation. Exemptions can be granted on the basis of credits for prior learning and/or evaluation of competences.

Department of Work and Social Economy

The arrangements set up by the Department of Work essentially aim at the recognition of non-formal and informal learning through the 'Certificate of Work Experience' ('Ervaringsbewijs') created by a decree approved on 30 April 2004. In short, people can receive a certificate of work experience if they demonstrate that they have acquired the skills needed to perform an occupation. The social partners give their advice on the variety of professions for which a certificate of work experience is relevant (and needs to be included). It is based on the competences related to a certain profession, no matter where one has achieved those competences. Therefore, professional competence profiles are translated into standards by the SERV (Flanders' Social and Economic Committee) and the social partners. These standards are used in a test situation to assess whether people dispose of the required competences. People can demonstrate their competences in an interview or a practical test organised by assessment centres. If they pass the test, they receive a certificate for work experience, granted by the Flemish government. The organisations wishing to assess applicants are recognised centrally 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.

Although the certificate of work experience is granted by the government, it is, at this stage, not equivalent to a diploma. Due to its close link to the labour market, it is the employers who can give support to the value of these certificates. While awaiting the new integrated framework (RAC based on the NQF), the certificate of work experience services will be continued. In addition to this procedure of recognising informal and non-formal learning, much attention has been given towards the implementation of a platform for competence-based matching (an interface which virtually connects individuals and their competences with prospective employers and training opportunities, which is further explained in more detail in the section on Skills Audits below).

Department of Culture, Youth, Sports and Media

The cultural, youth and sports sector are ideal places for giving attention to the recognition of competences. Both young people and adults want, for a diversity of reasons and within different environments, to make their competences visible. Within these sectors therefore, several instruments have been developed over the past years to make this possible.

Overall though, 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. In the cultural and youth sectors the focus is for the moment only on RAC in the sense of 'identification' and

¹¹ Peeters, A. and Dedecker, F. 'Zonder diploma secundair toch naar het hoger onderwijs', Delta, Journal for Higher Education, December 2008, 20, p.34-39.

'documentation' and less so on 'assessment' and 'certification'. Several instruments exist in these sectors to 'make competences visible' which are explained in more detail below.

The Socio-cultural and Youth sector

In Flanders, Socius, 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. In 2008, the Support Centre for Youth together with Socius developed the tool Oscar which was, after an initial testing phase, presented to the public in November 2009. This tool is the answer for the socio-cultural sector to be able to make people's competences visible. Apart from making competences visible, Oscar is also meant explicitly to validate and document¹².

On the one hand there is volunteering in which young people and adults develop all kinds of competences and on the other hand there are numerous courses in which participants work on their competences.

Oscar can be used as a portfolio to bring together experience from informal and non-formal learning environments. They are integrated into the portfolio with the denominator 'competence documents'. In this regard, a learning certificate is a competence document with no assessment of the obtained competences.

The wide interest within the socio-cultural sector to work with Oscar showed that it is a useful tool for organisations. However it was not entirely clear yet which role Oscar could play in the integrated RAC policy. A report issued at the end of 2011 investigated what the links could be between Oscar and other policy areas and which actions could stimulate the integration of Oscar in other policy areas. The developed actions centred around raising awareness and making the usefulness and added value of Oscar visible to the labour market actors and providers of education and training.¹³

Whereas the use of Oscar was until recently limited to the socio-cultural sector for adults and young people¹⁴, it has now been taken over by the organisations in the following four sectors: amateur arts (Vlaamse Kunst); cultural heritage (FARO); the pupils' Council (Vlaamse Scholierenkoepel) and youth organisations (Vlaamse Verenigingen Jeugd).

Youth work is an area where non-formal and informal learning often takes place and where this type of learning could lead to a qualification on the NQF. However, there is no strong support in the youth sector in developing formal qualifications for voluntary youth workers. The sector fears that a higher degree of formalization and demands could trump voluntary activity. There does seem to be a fundamental openness towards the development of a specific profile for youth worker even though there are no specific agreements at this time.

Within the sector of youth work, attestations of participation in training courses are delivered by the Agency Socio-cultural Work for Youth. Reforms are currently taking place with regard to the regulation of these attestations since the existing regulations are outdated. The main changes relate to the competence based approach (competence profiles, competence booklet, reflection on the learning process)¹⁵.

¹² As explained by the European Youth Forum

¹³ Pieters, B.; Annaert, N. And Vermeiren, B., 'Eindrapport. Verbinding van Oscar met andere beleidsdomeinen. Overheidsopdracht in opdracht van het Departement Onderwijs en Vorming van de Vlaamse Overheid. Steunpunt Jeugd, 10.11.211.

¹⁴ From 01.01.2013 the Support Centre Youth, VIP Youth and the Flemish Youth Council have merged to form the Ambrasade.

¹⁵ http://www.sociaalcultureel.be/jeugd/regelgeving_KV/131213_kadervormingstrajecten-memorie-2deprincip.pdf

Sports and the Flemish School for Trainers

Bloso¹⁶ is the sport agency of the Flemish government and has been part of the policy domain Culture, Youth, Media and Sports since 2006. The Flemish School for Trainers (VTS) is the institution coordinating the cooperation between Bloso, the Flemish universities and higher education colleges providing an education and training programme in physical education and the Flemish Sports Federation. This institution created a validation guide in March 2012 that describes the procedure that applicants have to go through for RAC. There is however no legal base for RAC in the sports sector. The current RAC procedure was developed in 2009 to respond to the demand for exemptions. Applicants who have successfully gone through the RAC procedure can obtain either an exemption for a course or training programme or a full exemption which means that a proof of competences equal to a VTS qualification is awarded.

Currently, it is emphasised by the VTS that the level of competences required to obtain a diploma is similar between the different sports sectors.

Towards one single framework with an integrated approach towards validation

Since 2011, the Departments of Education and Training; Work and Social Economy and Culture, Youth, Media and Sports started discussing the development of an integrated approach towards RAC, based on the qualifications from the NQF. The main driver for this development was to respond to the fragmentation concerning existing RAC practices and terminologies as well as to be more in line with the Council Recommendation on the Validation of non-formal and informal learning of December 2012.

2.2 Skills audits

A sound definition of 'skills audit' has not been developed as such in Flanders and generally the EU definition of skills audit is adopted.

The Department of Work and Social Economy jointly with the VDAB¹⁷ are increasingly focused on 'making competences visible'. This focus has to be understood within the wider current climate of the 'bottlenecks economy' and getting the best possible match between available and requested competences.

The VDAB has recently (by the beginning of 2013) implemented an operational platform for competence based matching which uses common tools and languages to match the competences of an individual to those required by employers. It is based on Competent, an online competence management system managed by the SERV consisting of occupational profiles validated by social partners and stakeholders. These services would allow individuals to move more smoothly between jobs and sectors, thereby reducing current skills bottlenecks. After all, it would help all citizens to obtain labour market relevant skills, to make their skills visible, or to re-skill to meet the needs of changing labour market demands. This matching system is considered to be innovative and a good practice within Europe¹⁸.

Part of the competence based matching platform is a tool "My Career" (Mijn Loopbaan) which facilitates the identification and documentation of competences.

¹⁶ Agency for the Improvement of Physical Development, Sport and Open Air Recreation.

¹⁷ Public employment service of Flanders.

¹⁸ Magazine of the Support Centre of Work and Social Economy 'Over werk', 'Competence orientated matching', Acco Publishing, 1/2011.

2.3 Relationship with qualifications framework and credit systems, and information on standards used for validation

Qualifications and qualifications frameworks

The process of referencing the NQF with the European one was completed in 2011¹⁹. The NQF outlines what kind of training, experiences and roles can lead to a qualification. It aims to create a reference framework that allows education and training providers and the labour market to communicate about qualifications in the Flemish community and in Europe. The NQF distinguishes between 'professional qualifications' and 'educational qualifications', a distinction which the EQF does not make. A professional qualification gives an overview of the competences with which a profession can be exercised. A professional qualification can be obtained through education, training or the certification of one's practical experience. It is 'a complete and classified set of competences with which a profession can be exercised'. An educational qualification is 'a complete and classified set of competences with which further studies in secondary or higher education can be undertaken or professional activities can be performed'. Educational qualifications are exclusively issued by educational institutions. Depending on the educational level and the form of education, educational qualifications may consist of one or more professional qualifications, final objectives and/or specific final objectives²⁰.

Credit systems

The Flemish Higher Education sector has been using the ECTS for over ten years and no significant changes have taken place in this area since 2010 except for a stronger focus on searching for possibilities in which RAC can be better linked to pathways of lifelong learning.

The system for credit accumulation starts from learning outcomes. Credits in higher education give an indication of the effort or amount of work (workload) that a student has to deliver to acquire learning results. The workload is the time that the student has taken to execute all learning activities such as attending courses and seminars, completing practice and projects, self-studying and exams that are necessary to acquire and demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes. The workload of one academic year is set at 60 ECTS credits²¹. 60 credits correspond with 1,500 to 1,800 hours of workload. Learning outcomes that have been acquired previously can after a successful assessment or validation of the learning outcomes lead to an acquisition of the corresponding credits. Credits are referred to in Flanders as "study points", while students who successfully complete a course or modules are awarded a credit certificate.

No credit systems have been developed for compulsory education in Flanders and currently, no intentions are identified that would lead to such a system in the near future²².

Flanders is closely following the European evolutions with regard to ECVET²³, but has not undertaken formal initiatives to implement the system. A consultation amongst Flemish stakeholders (advisory and consultative bodies such as VLOR and SERV, training providers, representatives of the profit sector, representatives of the social profit sector and NVAO) regarding ECVET in 2007 showed that most of the consulted organisations found that the

¹⁹ AKOV, 'Referencing of the Flemish Qualifications Framework to the European Qualifications Framework. Flemish Government, July 2011, Government of Flanders.

²⁰ [http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/kwalificatiestructuur/links-en-publicaties/bijlagen/Brochure-Developed_Approved_Implemented-\(En\)-12-2012.pdf](http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/kwalificatiestructuur/links-en-publicaties/bijlagen/Brochure-Developed_Approved_Implemented-(En)-12-2012.pdf) (p. 7)

²¹ The number of hours per credit is 25 à 30. Source: Flemish Report on Implementation of the Bologna process 2012.

²² AKOV, 'Referencing of the Flemish Qualifications Framework to the European Qualifications Framework. Flemish Government, July 2011, Government of Flanders.

²³ This system is also based on learning outcomes and allows to validate results of non-formal and informal learning

system had potential, but remained much too vague and unclear and needed further elaboration²⁴.

Standards

Work

The 'certificate of work experience' uses the professional competence standards which are approved by the SERV. Specific standards are drawn up for each occupation by the SERV and the sectoral social partners jointly. These occupational standards consist of the professional competence profiles that describe what may be expected of a practitioner from a given profession. For each selected occupation 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 and 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 being able 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'²⁵.

By 2012, all standards had been developed for the selected professions. Awaiting an integrated framework of RAC based on the NQF, no new professions for which a certificate can be awarded were added.²⁶

2.4 National institutional framework

In terms of the institutional framework for validation, each Ministry Department regulates RAC within its own sector. More specifically, these are the Departments for Work and Social Economy, Education and Training and Culture, Youth, Media and Sports.

2.5 Governance and allocation of responsibilities

2.5.1 Please describe the allocation of responsibilities (at national, regional, local, social partner, provider level) according to the different aspects of validation

The situation with regard to the allocation of responsibilities with regard to RAC policy in the different sectors has broadly remained the same since 2010. However, things could move more quickly in the near future.

Department of Work and Social Economy

In terms of the approach towards RAC in this policy area, it is the Department for Work and Social Economy which takes the initiative and has responsibility for the design.

As described in the EU Inventory 2010 report, specifically for the certificate for vocational experience, a procedure was developed to deal with the different aspects of validation in which different stakeholders have a role. To decide for which professions a certificate will be developed, the initiative lies with the social partners who will offer their advice to the Minister of Work about which professions can provide added value. Once the Flemish government has approved this list, the sectoral social partners are instructed, under guidance of the SERV, to develop a standard for these professions.

²⁴ AKOV, 'Referencing of the Flemish Qualifications Framework to the European Qualifications Framework. Flemish Government, July 2011, Government of Flanders.

²⁵ Cecile Mathou, 'EU Inventory on Validation of non-formal and informal learning 2010. Country Report Belgium (Flanders). European Commission, DG Education and Culture and Cedefop.

²⁶ Departement Werk en Sociale Economie in samenwerking met het Subsidieagentschap Werk en Sociale Economie en het ESF-agentschap, 'Jaarrapport ervaringsbewijs. 1 januari 2012 – 31 December 2012'.

Information and promotion as well as awareness-raising are done in partnership between the Department, VDAB, and the (sectoral) social partners.

The actual assessment is undertaken by the assessment centres. In order to guarantee quality, transparency and objectiveness, only assessment centres recognised by the government can award the certificate.²⁷

The actual certification is done by the Ministry of Work and Social Economy.

Department of Education and Training

In this policy sector the approach towards RAC is more decentralised than in the Department for Work and Social Economy and the education and training institutions are given a lot of responsibility. RAC practices in this sector develop rather bottom-up depending on the motivation of those concerned and the amount of demand. However, incentives are also provided centrally for example support and the availability of assessor training at association level.

Overall, the Ministry of Education and Training is responsible for the broad design of and approach towards RAC by drafting the legislation on the different sectors within the education field. The actual implementation on the ground is done jointly by the Department of Education and Training and the associations and education institutions for Higher Education and by the Department for Education and Training and institutions for adult education.

In terms of providing general information, this role is implemented by the Ministry of Education and Training whereas both for adult education and higher education it is the institutions themselves which provide specific information and raise awareness. Also with regard to providing counselling and guidance; undertaking assessments; certifying the outputs of the validation procedures and quality assurance both for higher and adult education, it is the associations, education institutions and adult education institutions which provide this service.

Evaluation and review are carried out yearly by the associations and education institutions themselves and every five years by the Ministry of Education and Training for higher education whereas the Inspectorate does this for adult education.

Department of Culture, Youth, Media and Sports

The Sports sector

In the domain of Sports, and more specifically the validation of non-formal and informal learning done by the VTS, the division of tasks is as follows. The design of the procedure and approach is developed within the administration of Bloso and formally accepted by the government. Information, promotion and awareness raising takes place via the VTS and mostly via their website²⁸. The role of guidance is shared between different stakeholders depending also on the specific sector within Sports; a person from the Bloso administration will be involved, together with partners within the Flemish sports federation as well as the applicant since they have to put the dossier together. Undertaking the assessment as well as the certification of the outcomes of the validation procedure is done by the VTS. Similar to the role of guidance, partners from a specific sector within sports will be included in the assessment phase depending on which fields need to be validated.

There is no external quality assurance on the RAC procedure undertaken by the VTS. Quality assurance is ensured by the broad range of partners included within the partnership and the composition of the RAC Commission within the VTS. In addition, no formal

²⁷ Departement Werk en Sociale Economie in samenwerking met het Subsidieagentschap Werk en Sociale Economie en het ESF-agentschap, 'Jaarrapport ervaringsbewijs. 1 januari 2012 – 31 December 2012'.

²⁸ I.e. <http://www.bloso.be/VlaamseTrainersschool/Pages/default.aspx>

evaluation exercise has been put into place yet since the validation procedure at the VTS has only recently started.

2.5.2 Explain more specifically the role of different stakeholders²⁹

Overall, no substantial changes have taken place since 2010 with regard to the role of the different stakeholders in the validation of non-formal and informal learning in Flanders.

Education and training providers

In the higher education sector, five associations are responsible for the provision of RAC. Each 'association' (cooperation platform between universities and university colleges) is legally authorised to act as an agency for RAC. These associations are:

- KU Leuven Association (Associatie KU Leuven).
- Ghent University Association (Associatie Universiteit Gent);
- Antwerp University Association (Associatie Universiteit en Hogescholen Antwerpen);
- Brussels University Association (Universitaire Associatie Brussel); and
- Limburg University Association (Associatie Universiteit-Hogescholen Limburg).

The KU Leuven Association is a network of 1 university (KU Leuven) and 7 university colleges spread over Flanders. At the moment, the university colleges are joining forces and growing into four large university colleges - one in each region - and one School of Arts.

The RAC 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 to the university or university college of their choice;
2. Assessment takes place in the university or university college based on the procedures outlined by the validation agency of the 'association' taking into account the learning outcomes of the programme applied for;
3. Issuing of a competence certificate, valid in all member institutions of the association, which is the basis for access or waivers for certain courses in the programme.

All public and private training providers can apply for accreditation at an assessment centre with regard to the work experience certificate. To guarantee fair treatment of individuals and transparent assessment, the assessment centres recognised for the work experience certificate 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).

Private sector actors (including social partners)

As explained in the 2010 EU Inventory report, in the Flemish community, the involvement of the social partners in drawing up the priorities for the work experience certificate 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)".

²⁹ http://www.evcvlaanderen.be/wie_is_wie/EVC_aanbieders.html

Yearly, the SERV launches a call for proposals of occupations to the sectoral social partners. At a later stage the sectoral social partners are also involved in the validation of the standards.

Regarding the position adopted by employers' organisations and trade unions, they agree globally on the principle of RAC recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Most of them underline the positive dimensions of this process as well as the opportunity that is therefore given to recognise the formative dimension of work. They recognise that the process can be useful when it comes to identifying cross-cutting competences as in the case of mobility or reconversion. To date, it can be considered that social partners are increasingly involved in the process. All the sectoral social partners signed an agreement with the Flemish government on topics related to education, training and labour market ('sectorconvenant'). Almost all the sectoral social partners are, in some ways, involved in promoting work experience certificates in their sector.

Employers

As was already the case in 2010, the role of skills or competences in Human Resources Management is still a significant issue in many private sector organisations in Belgium. Research has shown that many companies have undertaken analysis of the activities, roles, job and person specifications within their businesses, leading to a description of competency profiles.

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.

Third sector organisations

The Sports sector

The RAC provider in the area of trainers in sport is the VTS where the role has been explained in more detail above. RAC in other areas of sport, for example obtaining exemption for the higher education programmes of Physical Education is being undertaken by the Associations.

Socio-cultural and Youth sector

No significant changes have taken place since 2010 with regard to providers in the socio-cultural sector in Flanders.

In the 2010 EU Inventory report for Flanders it was explained that there are fundamental differences with regard to the RAC in socio-cultural adult education, compared with the policy areas Education and Work. As emphasised by Socius:

the actors involved in socio-cultural adult education prefer to develop their own instruments and procedures to recognise the acquired skills. This freedom is seen as crucial. Stakeholders from socio-cultural education fear that the emphasis is placed on the acquisition of diplomas, rather than the acquisition of skills and competences.

The youth sector has been working on implementing competence based practices in the field.

Also, legislation is catching up with competence based training by reforming the regulations on attestation in training;

2.5.3 Coordination between stakeholders

In the absence of an integrated framework, the different sectors in the field of RAC work together despite diverging and sometimes conflicting policies and practices.

2.6 Examples of national regional, local or EU funded initiatives

Example in the socio-cultural sector

Oscar is the end product of Socius and Ambrassade. The portfolio project 'Oscar'³⁰ was set up in 2008 by Socius and the Support Centre for Youth (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 involved in social-cultural work for young people and adults who undertake volunteering and training courses and gain competences via these activities. 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 totally flexible, it will be made compatible with other RAC procedures. It is a simple and uniform tool to create and collect documents of competences by organisations and participants involved in socio-cultural work for youths and adults.

Besides giving one overview of competences acquired within the socio-cultural sector, at an organisational level, Oscar stimulates organisations to think about the courses they offer as well as the roles and tasks within volunteering in terms of competences. This can be a starting point to consciously undertake a competence policy: organisations gain a view on educational strengths of and possible improvements of how they function, they can deploy the skills of their employees more thoughtfully as well as provide targeted development opportunities for their volunteers³¹.

Furthermore as explained earlier, the use of Oscar has now been taken over by the organisations in the following four sectors: amateur arts (Vlaamse Kunst); cultural heritage (FARO); the pupils' Council (Vlaamse Scholierenkoepel) and youth organisations (Vlaamse Verenigingen Jeugd).

Example in education (youth)

Specifically targeted at students who work during summer holidays, a project was set up by the Service for Professional Education which is part of the Department of Education and Training. The aim of a project like OPTIE VAK.WERK³² is to inform and raise awareness about the 'world of work' starting from the age of 15 to 16 years old. At the same time competences acquired whilst doing a holiday job are recognised and validated with a clear focus on social skills.

What is innovative about this project is its focus on young people; there is an existing focus on adults and their prior acquired competences but this is less so with regard to the competences young people have acquired and where validation might be beneficial to them upon entering the labour market.

Example in the youth sector

C-Stick was developed by the youth organisation Jes. This organisation guides young people who do not easily find their way in society such as for example early school leavers. A lot of time used to be spent on their search for work and drafting a CV. The C-stick automatically generates CVs on the basis of the experiences young people acquire. Young people can for each application state what they would like to include in their CV. The C-Stick also includes a set of techniques for the identification of competences and competence

³⁰ <https://www.oscaronline.be/>

³¹ <https://www.oscaronline.be/index.php?a=item/view/5302>

³² http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/dbo/projecten/projecten_optie_vak_werk.htm

development, with the core elements: observation of competences, feedback, group dynamics, peer learning and experiential learning. An additional advantage is that the C-Stick can just be used as a memory stick³³.

Several initiatives are being developed by local providers in the youth sector for example:

- the Compas-label in Antwerp. Each organisation that offers pathways to help young people competent in supporting other young people are eligible to receive the Compas-label. These organisations can in turn validate young people's experiences by means of a Compas in which an overview is given of their competences.
- Kazou developed 'de competentieroos', which stimulates self-evaluation in participants (http://ambrassade.be/sites/default/files/publicatie/bestand/KRAX_12_Bijna_iedereen_gaat_voorbij_aan_zijn_eigen_talent.pdf)
- My digital me: a personal European e-portfolio for youth (and adults) to map their competences, skills and interests and to add pieces of evidence (with a focus on self-evaluation and reflection).

Furthermore, a number of pilot projects concerning RAC procedures are currently ongoing, for instance in tourism (RAC procedure to guide lecturers) and for civil servants of the Flemish government (development of a procedure to be able to access jobs of the Flemish government without having obtained the required diploma – implemented in 2012).

Europass and Youthpass

It was explained that the use of Europass and Youthpass tools is not widespread in the Flemish education sector. There is not one standard CV format which is in use for the portfolio tool but rather each institution within one association tends to have its own template.

Data on the use of Europass in Belgium shows that Belgium was only 19th in the ranking of visits for the Europass portal³⁴.

As part of the work experience certificate it is possible to obtain the Europass certificate supplement per profession as stated on the VDAB website³⁵.

2.7 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

2.7.1 Funding

At the moment, in the higher education sector it is the education and training institutions which have to bear the various costs of validation together with individuals who also bear some of the associated costs. So there is no funding available from the government for RAC within the higher education sector. Thus stakeholders in this sector feel that on the one hand RAC is promoted but that on the other hand it is not financially supported, which affects its acceptance at institutional level.

This is different for the work sector; a yearly budget of EUR 800,000 is allocated to the assessment centres which issue work experience certificates.

It is not clear what the funding framework will be once the integrated RAC policy is being implemented. Discussions about this are currently taking place.

2.7.2 Distribution of costs

Work experience certificate

³³ www.jes.be/C-stick/.

³⁴ <http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/en/resources/statistics>

³⁵ <http://www.vdab.be/europass/cs/index.html>

The yearly budget of around EUR 800,000 for work experience certificates is provided through 55% co-financing with 45% coming from the ESF. This budget goes integrally to the assessment centres which then provide the service to the individual for free (at the most a fee of 100 euro might have to be paid in certain circumstances).

The assessment centres are given a one-off start-up reimbursement of EUR 15,000 and in addition the centres receive EUR 5,000 for each additional certificate that they complete. The accredited assessment centre receives per applicant a maximum reimbursement of EUR 240 to offer guidance about competences or advice during the process of completing the talent pass. Upon assessing the competences of the applicant according to the relevant articles of the work experience Decree³⁶, a reimbursement is received of EUR 960; 1,200 or 1,440 depending on the certificate for which the applicant is undergoing an assessment.

As part of the government measure 'training vouchers' an employee can request on an annual basis a training voucher to the value of 250 euro for which the government contributes half. These vouchers can also be used for RAC. Until now, all recognised assessment centres offer the service for free.

Higher education

The procedure for recognition of qualifications in higher education is free of charge. For competences acquired outside formal education, that is, through non-formal or informal learning, associations are responsible for recognition and assessment. Before the initial assessment is conducted, an administrative fee of EUR 55 is charged.

The maximum cost for the assessment varies³⁷:

- 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 study costs (depending on the number of competence assessments to be undertaken).

The associations calculate and charge different prices for a validation procedure. The average cost price for the individual per association is as follows: (these figures have remained the same since 2007) (without the administrative cost of EUR 55)³⁸:

- KU Leuven Association: EUR 122
- Ghent University Association: EURO 155
- Antwerp University Association: EURO 256
- Brussels University Association: EURO 155

It was mentioned in the previous EU Inventory report of 2010 that most institutions had expressed not to see a real immediate economic return in the process. This is still the case currently although to a lesser extent. For example in higher education granting exemptions to an applicant means that institutions lose money because the recognition process currently does not generate new incomes, requires heavy investments and additionally, exemptions might result in the payment of a lower admission fee. However, part of the latest developments in the higher education sector are focused on increasing the cost-benefit ratio both for the institutions as well as the candidates by looking at ways in which, instead of screening a full profile, focus is placed on clusters of competences. It is hoped that this will also attract more people to participate in a RAC procedure.

³⁶ Art. 7(4), (5) and (6) added to BVR 2007-10-05/36

³⁷ Evaluatie van de EVC-, EVK- en vrijstellingsprocedures aan de associaties, hogescholen en universiteiten in de Vlaamse Gemeenschap. Departement Onderwijs en Vorming – Afdeling Hoger Onderwijs. Mei 2010, pp. 14-15.

³⁸ Ibidem.

Overall in recent years, procedures and practices in higher education have improved and providers are now better at accommodating RAC to the profile of candidates and thus making the process overall more efficient. Moreover, guidance practitioners are now more focused on the first steps, i.e. advising potential candidates and helping them estimate their chances of succeeding in the RAC procedure. To this end, the 'quick scan' instrument is being used by some of the associations during the first phase. This helps the guidance practitioner, based on the CV and work experience, to determine if it is worth starting the procedure. This in time will lead to the system being less expensive and more 'tailor made'. Overall, it is agreed that if RAC leads to a shortened education pathway then it is worth the investment; practice shows that this is easier to achieve for individuals who have a substantial amount of professional experience.

The Sports sector

The VTS does not have a specific budget set aside for costs related to providing RAC since these costs can be quite variable and ad-hoc based on demand. Overall one person within the administration works full time on all validation dossiers. In addition, depending on the dossier three to four people are needed for the RAC Commission and five to six people are needed to work on the dossier and assessments.

The administration costs to follow a RAC procedure at the VTS are EUR 60. If it is decided that the applicant can start an assessment then the following costs:

- Initiator: EUR 100
- Instructor B: EUR 200
- Trainer B: EUR 200
- Trainer A: EUR 400³⁹

The Socio-cultural and Youth sector

The use of the Oscar tool by the organisations is being financed by the Flemish government but not on an annual basis, rather on an ad hoc basis.

2.7.3 Data on flows of beneficiaries

Below are data with regard to flows of beneficiaries presented per sector.

In the discussion note on the integrated approach towards RAC, it is pointed out that overall the number of candidates participating in a RAC dossier or a work experience certificate is still relatively low. This is mainly because of the limited knowledge of the public of the existence of these possibilities⁴⁰.

Education and training sector

Higher Education

It was not possible to obtain figures for the whole of this sector. The figures below have been obtained from the KU Leuven Association⁴¹ and concern the academic years 2007-2008 until 2012-2013.

In total 795 RAC dossiers have been started over the six academic years within the KU Leuven Association. On average, 130 dossiers per year are started but with a substantial decline in the last two years in the number of RAC dossiers. Of the number of actual considered dossiers (754) 94% were (partly) assigned and 6% were not. In terms of study areas covered, the highest number of assigned dossiers were in education (228) followed by

³⁹ The EVC-EVK procedure guide on http://www.bloso.be/VlaamseTrainersschool/AanbodOpleidingen/Documents/120322_EVC-EVKGids.pdf

⁴⁰ Discussion note 'Towards an integrated EVC-policy', 19 July 2011.

⁴¹ The KU Leuven Association is considered to be the biggest of the five associations. With almost 100,000 students, the KU Leuven Association accounts for 43% of the entire student population in Flemish higher education. The data of one institution is missing.

health care (186) and commercial and business sciences (145). The majority of requests were for the professional bachelor (73%) followed by the academic bachelor (18%). Only 5% of requests were for a master programme. 70% of the candidates are women which is linked to the fact that the majority of requests are in the education and health care sectors.

Almost 46% of candidates had secondary education as the highest obtained qualification. 1.34% of candidates had no secondary education qualification which demonstrates that people without the necessary qualifications but with relevant work experience are being served.

Since the start of RAC in higher education, only 10 dossiers have been submitted to obtain a full qualification. The majority of these are at the level of professional bachelor.

Considering the significant decline in dossiers within the KU Leuven Association over the last two years, the institutions were asked what the potential reasons for this decline could be. The following reasons were stated:

- Less advertisement for the procedure has been made by some institutions because it is too expensive or the procedure is under revision;
- The possibility of obtaining a bachelor in nursing via HBO5⁴² which already leads to exemptions based on the qualification makes it only worthwhile to start a RAC-procedure if candidates have a lot of work experience. This might have decreased the need for RAC in this study area;

It is not clear at the moment why the demand for RAC in the teacher training programme has decreased.

Another explanation for the lower number of dossiers is that the stronger the EVK policy (policy regarding the accreditation of prior formal learning) becomes, with the option of more adapted pathways, RAC is often viewed as not worth doing and then the advice increasingly is not to undertake the procedure.

At the moment, discussions are taking place on what the possibilities are for cooperation between the different institutions within the KU Leuven Association. Mostly this happens where there is a relatively high number of dossiers. On the other hand, it could prove to be useful to consider cooperation where there is not much expertise because only a few candidates submit a request. In this case it is important to look at what types of cooperation might be desirable: division of expertise, shared assessors, common development of instruments, central assessment or partner assessment etc. Some of these new ways of cooperation are already being implemented. For example, one institution refers RAC dossiers with regard to the teacher training programme to another institution. Overall though it is felt by stakeholders in this sector that it is not desirable to have common assessment instruments for every study field also because some instruments are very specific to the study area. Students do not tend to 'shop' between institutions because they would have to pay for that and also because it is not immediately clear how many exemptions will be obtained. 'Shopping around' tends to take place more often for free procedures such as the entrance examination and the EVK.

Work sector

Between 2006 and end December 2012 7,475 assessments were undertaken and 4,232 work experience certificates were granted. For 2012 only, 826 people received a certificate.

In the top 5 professions in which work experiences certificates are obtained one can find: dental assistant (14.4%); forklift driver (12.1%); employment consultant (11.5%); cleaner (11.1%) and social interpreter (8%).

⁴² Or higher vocational education. In order to avoid confusion with higher vocational education provided in the Netherlands, it is called HBO5 since 2009. It matches the European education level 5 whereas the Dutch higher vocational education matches the education level 6: Bachelor. In the Flemish HBO5, programmes can be found which previously were called tertiary education. HBO5 is, as a qualification level, situated between secondary and higher education.

In terms of employment status of the candidates following a RAC procedure, 62.23% of candidates were employed as an employee or self-employed in 2012 whereas the percentage of job seekers (37.77%) was a substantial increase compared to 2011 (i.e. 29.01%). Especially for the professions forklift driver and employment consultant it is job seekers who try to obtain a work experience certificate. In terms of age group, the largest group obtaining certificates in 2012 were the 26 to 44 years old with 53.99%. Furthermore, there has been a significant increase of those older than 55 years old (19.3%) in 2012 whereas a decrease in the 16 to 25 years old obtaining work experience certificates (12.47%) was observed. Finally, in terms of education level, of those following a RAC procedure in 2012, 31.17% were educated at lower level; 42.78% at medium level and 25.04% at high level. The latter can be found especially in three new professions, namely: social interpreter (35.53%) and employment consultant (29.41%) and trainer/supervisor (10.12%).

The government gives specific attention to people who are part of risk groups such as ethnic minorities, older people, people with a lower level of education and people with a disability. The work experience certificate can strengthen the labour market position of these people. In 2012, around 82.97% of the candidates were part of one of the risk target groups. Overall, since the start of the certificate in April 2006 until December 2012, 88% of the candidates were from a risk target group⁴³.

Department for Culture, Youth, Media and Sport

Socio-cultural and youth sectors

Data of November 2013 show that 60 organisations currently make use of for example Oscar and this use is spread over six sectors. So far, 18,453 competence documents have been given to 13,302 participants whereas 3,212 participants have made their own electronic portfolio. The use of Oscar has been increasing since its creation in 2008 and is expected to do even more so with the expansion of its use to other sectors.

The Sports sector

At the VTS around 10 to 15 people a year undergo the validation procedure and this number has been only slightly increasing since the start in 2009. Most of these people obtain one or more exemptions and around 20% obtain full exemption.

2.7.4 Evidence of benefits to individuals

As explained in the previous EU Inventory report, the stated aim of RAC in the Flemish Community is to help individuals to achieve personal development and increased integration into the labour market and society in general. Work experience certificates contribute to a higher level of employment and to easing tensions on the labour market.

In Flanders RAC is also about improving access to formal education systems, shortening formal educational pathways and stimulating lifelong learning.

The previous EU Inventory report stated the results of a study on beneficiaries' experience and the effect of a work experience certificate through a survey with 320 candidates and 45 employers (2009) launched by the Department of Work and Social Economy. The findings indicated that for the candidates, these certificates have an important subjective value. All the candidates stated that these certificates mean a lot to them and that they grew in self-confidence, self-awareness and pride. 70% of the candidates stated 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.

⁴³ Departement Werk en Sociale Economie in samenwerking met het Subsidieagentschap Werk en Sociale Economie en het ESF-agentschap, 'Jaarrapport ervaringsbewijs. 1 januari 2012 – 31 December 2012'.

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 work experience certificates provide immediate confirmation of their professional competences. For existing employees, work 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 pathways is cost-saving and it increases the chances of success. The work experience certificate therefore further encourages companies to use a skills approach as a point of departure for their human resources policy.

With regard to the competence documents that can be obtained via Oscar or other portfolio-instruments in the socio-cultural and youth sectors it was explained that these have a lower civil effect than the RAC documents issued in other policy areas. It was expressed in the Support Centre Youth report of 2011 that the government should take the initiative in increasing the value of these competence documents whilst taking into account indeed that competences included in these documents have not been assessed as such⁴⁴.

3 Information, advice and guidance

3.1 Awareness-raising and recruitment

Up to now, little information and promotion activities have been implemented in Flanders regarding RAC. However, in time a large awareness-raising campaign will be needed to inform the public about RAC, as well as a new website adapted for each target group and a general information brochure. In addition, intermediate organisations which are closely related to the target groups could function as information centres.

3.2 Role of information, advice and guidance networks/institutions

In 2009 an expertise network for RAC providers (around 200) that includes an official RAC website (see: <http://www.evcvlaanderen.be/>) and is directed by a 'team of RAC promoters' supported by AKOV, was launched. The aim of this network and website is to support and enhance the quality of RAC procedures and support new providers. The members of the network are experts in RAC, working in different sectors: higher education, adult education, assessment centres for the certification of work experience, continuing vocational training, the cultural sector, youth and sports sector.

The RAC website also informs the wider public on the different RAC possibilities.

The VDAB also provides specific information on how to obtain a work experience certificate⁴⁵. Furthermore, the social partners have also an important role in awareness raising. In the area of higher education, RAC is part of the information and orientation process of each education and training institution. It is also mentioned on the website of each association. Furthermore, potential beneficiaries are obliged to participate in the organised information sessions before taking part in the exam commission⁴⁶.

⁴⁴ Pieters, B.; Annaert, N. And Vermeiren, B., 'Eindrapport. Verbinding van Oscar met andere beleidsdomeinen. Overheidsopdracht in opdracht van het Departement Onderwijs en Vorming van de Vlaamse Overheid. Steunpunt Jeugd, 10.11.211.

⁴⁵ <http://www.vdab.be/tests/ervaringsbewijs.shtml>

⁴⁶ <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/secundair/examencommissie/index.htm>

3.3 Measures to enhance the awareness of validation initiatives and practices amongst guidance practitioners

The information website contains information on validation initiatives and practices. At the moment, there are no specific measures to enhance awareness specifically on validation initiatives and practices amongst guidance practitioners.

Guidance practitioners in the field of work are informed about the work experience certificate.

4 Quality assurance and evaluation

4.1 Quality Assurance Framework

The main body in Flanders overseeing quality assurance for pathways leading to professional qualifications is AKOV (Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training) which was set up in 2009 within the then developed integrated system of quality assurance. The following services were merged into this Agency: the inspection of quality in education, the Curriculum Development Service, database, NARIC, the coordination of RAC procedures and central examinations, and the secretariat of the RAC expertise network. AKOV will in time be responsible for the quality assurance of all education, training and RAC systems that lead to recognised qualifications in the Flemish qualifications structure.

The quality assurance framework for higher education does not fall currently under AKOV. By consequence the associations in the higher education sector and the adult education centres differ in their procedures, standards and methodologies in place. Institutional practice in recognition of prior learning is not explicitly included in the quality assurance processes used to evaluate institutions and/or programmes in higher education⁴⁷.

For the work experience certificate, the quality assurance framework is regulated by the funding scheme. More specifically, important factors are content guidelines (script/test), the quality label (ESF or equivalent) and the ESF audit mechanisms. Furthermore, the assessment instrument is examined by an independent commission (validation commission) consisting of experts in RAC and in the relevant field.

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. 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

Given the more centralised approach with regard to work experience certificates, the assessment centres are subject to the same rules of procedure. Since 2010, with the aim of strengthening the quality provided by the assessment centres, it was decided to make it compulsory for all assessment centres which offer the option of obtaining a work experience certificate, to have a validated practice test ('praktijkproef').

This means furthermore that when a practice test has been set up by an assessment centre and has been validated, another assessment centre has to work with exactly the same practice test. The aim of this approach is to have a more efficient spending of resources, i.e. one-off use of resources with regard to the design and development of a practice test as well as a guarantee that the same assessment procedure is used, no matter to which assessment centre a candidate goes.

⁴⁷ Flemish Report on Implementation of the Bologna process 2012.

The Flemish ESF-agency has developed a validation procedure for this purpose based on the following criteria: reliability, validity and alignment with SERV standards. All assessment centres which are accredited for this profession, are obliged to work with the same validated test⁴⁸.

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

AKOV has also made available a quality kit RAC to ensure quality in education. This kit can be used as a self-evaluation instrument. Several quality aspects of competence measurement are covered.

With regard to the socio-cultural sector, no changes have taken place and the quality assurance system as described in the 2010 report still stands except that it is now also adopted by the organisations in the additional sectors which have recently started using Oscar. According to the strategy on RAC in socio-cultural education, quality assurance is regarded as an important condition for the legitimacy of an RAC 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 guarantee 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 to the accredited training providers, where there is a degree 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 adopted on RAC in socio-cultural education includes 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"⁴⁹.

4.3 Evaluation framework

There is no overall evaluation framework; each sector has its own evaluation framework. The Department of Work and Social Economy issues a yearly report on the functioning of the work experience certificate.

The Department of Education and Training undertakes every 5 years an evaluation of the performance of all higher education institutions, whereas this is done yearly by the associations themselves.

The Association KU Leuven commissioned an online survey of candidates and coordinators on the quality of the RAC procedure⁵⁰, relating to accessibility, transparency, assessment, professionalism and quality assurance. The following conclusions have been made based on the survey results⁵¹:

⁴⁸ AKOV, 'Referencing of the Flemish Qualifications Framework to the European Qualifications Framework, Report July 2011', Government of Flanders.

⁴⁹ Socius, 2006, quoted in Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning. OECD Thematic Review. Flanders (Belgium). Country Note and Country Background Report.

⁵⁰ Peeters, A. and Loyens, F., 'Bevraging kwaliteit van de EVC procedure. Vergelijking resultaten deelnemers en coördinatoren', Associatie KU Leuven, Academic year, 2011-2012.

⁵¹ The results are based on the opinion of 52 candidates and 10 coordinators. Answers ranging from totally agree to totally disagree.

- Overall, both coordinators and candidates (to a lesser extent) consider the accessibility to RAC procedures to be positive.
- On two statements only, the minority of candidates responded positively. These are the portfolio guidance (48%) and removing obstacles (39%);
- Guidance in relation to the competences of the programme and guidance in putting together the portfolio are not assessed positively by the candidates. The guide for starting a RAC procedure can still be optimised.
- With regard to transparency, only 40% of coordinators and candidates agree with the statement that it is clear how the assessment commission comes to a decision;
- Candidates are relatively positive about the assessment which they believe looks reliable and valid;
- With regard to quality assurance, some of the coordinators comment upon this not being assured enough but this may be due to for example the low number of dossiers overall which makes a structural and systematic approach to quality assurance difficult. So there is at the moment a lack of evaluation of the procedure and all its aspects.

5 Validation methods

5.1 Methods used and the validation process

The methods used and the validation process in the different sectors providing RAC is broadly still the same as it was described in the 2010 EU Inventory report.

Overall, a RAC procedure consists of three (or four) steps: 1) recognising/identifying an individual's competences ('documenting these competences can be seen as a separate step); 2) assessing an individual's competences on the basis of evidence by comparing it with the standard and 3) validating by an accredited body the competences of an individual acquired in a non-formal or informal setting assessed on the basis of prior determined criteria and in accordance with a standard which then leads to certification⁵².

*Higher education*⁵³

The five associations have to set up a recognition service and define a procedure (these are elaborated at the level of the institution for their own programmes).

Nevertheless, they are free to establish their own arrangements (centralised or decentralised organisation, application receivable all year round 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) certification. 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. The decision essentially is based 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 level?), relevance (is the evidence sufficiently matched with training courses?), quantity (does the evidence refer to a sufficiently long period of experience?) and variety of contexts (does the evidence refer to more than one context?). Experienced staff guide applicants during the preparation of their application. In some associations, there are clearly and nominally identified information documents.

Importantly, there are some key differences between the various associations in their approach towards RAC. The KU Leuven Association works on the basis of a decentralised assessment model and the test matrices are developed at the level of the study programme

⁵² www.evcvlaanderen.be

⁵³ Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning. OECD Thematic Review. Flanders (Belgium). Country Note and Country Background Report.

within the institution. Moreover, whereas the Ghent association has for example, a defined portfolio format for its institutions, the KU Leuven one does not work with one specific format given that a lot of practices had already been developed within the institutions. A number of common instruments have however been developed within KU Leuven such as the multiple short cases test for the nursing study programme, in basket for office management and short cases test for orthopedagogics study programme. Assessor training is carried out annually both for assessors and guidance practitioners. Even though working with a portfolio is the most common method used, it often proves to be difficult to assess all individual competences with this tool alone. Some of the associations also develop practice assessments and other broader assessment tools but only if there is sufficient demand.

The table below gives an overview of the most commonly used methods at the different stages of the validation process within the KU Leuven Association.

Table 5.1 Most commonly used methods at the different stages of the validation process within the KU Leuven Association

	Identification	Documentation	Assessment
Debate			
Declarative methods		X	
Interview	X		X
Observation		X	
Portfolio method			X
Presentation		X	X
Simulation and evidence extracted from work		X	X
Tests and examinations		X	X
Other (e.g. e-learning methods) – please specify			X Overall-assessment Skills-lab Reflection (after observation, presentation and simulation) (Multiple short) cases

A guiding principle in the procedures within the KU Leuven Association is that a judgement on the competences of the candidate is only made if competences can be assessed in three different ways.

The test matrix for the RAC procedure in the Bachelor education (primary education) from the KH Leuven⁵⁴ is presented below as a good practice.

⁵⁴ Leuven University College.

Table 5.2 The assessment instrument of the RAC procedure for Bachelor education (primary education (KH Leuven))

	Inflow	Flow	Outflow
General bachelor competences	Knowledge and ability tests		Limited portfolio assessment and competence orientated interview Casus test/Over All test
General teacher competences	Didactic aptitude test Practice test Portfolio assessment and competence orientated interview	Skillslab agogic competences Simulation lesson Over All-test Limited portfolio assessment and competence orientated interview	Over All test Portfolio assessment and competence orientated interview
Specific teacher competences		Didactic tests (lesson plans) Simulation lesson Portfolio assessment and competence orientated interview	In service lesson Portfolio assessment and competence orientated interview

Work experience certificate

This 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 anticipate 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 (*'praktijkproef'*). 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).

The table below gives an overview of the most commonly used methods at the different stages of the validation process by the assessment centres. Red is used to highlight which methods seem to be the most effective for the different stages of validation.

Table 5.3 Most commonly used methods at the different stages of the validation process by the assessment centres

	Identification	Documentation	Assessment
Debate			
Declarative methods			
Interview			
Observation			
Portfolio method			
Presentation			
Simulation and evidence extracted from work			
Tests and examinations			
Video			

Adult education

As mentioned before, the assessment of modules and the granting of exemptions are the exclusive competence of the centre for adult education. It is obvious that different validation procedures and techniques can be used in different centres. However some centres offering the same programmes (e.g. literacy, general knowledge, etc.) have cooperated towards more standardisation in validation procedures and techniques.

The RAC procedure provided by the VTS in the Sport area

The RAC procedure provided by the VTS (started in 2009) consists of seven phases which are the following:

1. Preparation: during this phase the applicant is expected to check whether his or her competences correspond to those in the 'catalogue programme grids VTS'.
2. Application.
3. Registration and start of the RAC procedure.
4. Composition of the RAC portfolio.
5. Receptivity tests: after receipt of the portfolio the pedagogical division of the VTS checks on the basis of a guide whether the applicant is eligible to continue the rest of the procedure. If the application is deemed eligible, the candidate is invited to undertake a competence interview and a control test.
6. Competence assessment on the basis of the above results.
7. Feedback of the decision with the applicant.

6 Validation practitioners

6.1 Profile of validation practitioners

No substantial changes have taken place since 2010 with regard to the profile of validation practitioners in Flanders

Concerning RAC leading to the award of the work experience certificate, the law decree 30/4/2004 and decision Flemish government 23/09/2005) determines that RAC assessors 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). It is not possible to combine the assessment activity with the actual guidance and support of the applicant. In higher education, in most cases the assessment is carried out by a jury of at least two assessors. However the organisation/appointment of juries/assessors varies depending on the Association. For instance Ghent has two independent assessors⁵⁵. 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 (KU Leuven and UGent) they can also refer to the guides on RAC 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.

6.2 Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

With regard to this subject no changes have been noted since 2010.

The Decree on flexibilisation of higher education (30 April 2004) describes some of the aspects of an RAC procedure. Although the decree prescribes a five-year evaluation of how the associations attend to the quality assurance of RAC-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 no external formal organisation or framework for professionalising validation practitioners in higher education. The institution for adult education in Flanders have their own individual RAC procedures; training of validation practitioners in these institutions has not yet been foreseen. The Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training has recently taken some initiatives for the professionalisation of validation practitioners.

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

6.3 Qualifications requirements

As explained in the 2010 EU Inventory report, in higher education there are no qualification requirements for validation practitioners determined by the government.

In 2013 AKOV started to develop the professional qualifications of assessor and guidance counsellor. For both profiles different stakeholders were involved. The qualifications will soon be presented to the RAC expertise network. In this way all the stakeholders involved, can agree with the qualifications.

The professional qualifications of assessor and guidance counsellor will be used as quality insurance instruments to improve the standard of RAC. Possibly, these qualifications will be used as a reference for elaborating training sessions for professionals in the field of assessment and guidance. At the moment these qualifications are not required for people wanting to work as an assessor or guidance counsellor.

With regard to the RAC practitioners of the VTS there is not one specific profile. The people working in the pedagogical division who follow up the RAC dossiers all have a Masters in

⁵⁵ Study on formal recognition of non-formal and informal learning, Nuffic, November 2008.

Physical Education and a qualification in pedagogy and can demonstrate work experience in this domain.

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7.1 Organisations consulted

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- KU Leuven Association
- Department of Work and Social Economy

- Department of Culture, Youth, Sports and Media
- Vlaamse Trainersschool (Flemish Trainer School)
- Agentschap voor Socio-cultureel Werk voor de Jeugd (Agency for Socio-cultural work for youth)