



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

Country report Netherlands

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1 Introduction

This report describes the introduction of the Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) in the historical and cultural context of the Netherlands. It is viewed as both a vision and tool for lifelong learning. It is necessary not only to take account of the Dutch LLL setting but also to examine closely the national learning culture with its specific systems, institutes and critical success factors.

From the start, the Netherlands was geared towards integrating VPL in the operational processes of national and sectoral systems for learning (education and training) and employment (human resources management and development). From a top-down perspective on this integral approach, a good overview is provided of the responsibilities that need to be clarified so that VPL can be used to its full potential. From a bottom-up perspective there are real, practical issues for opening up VPL to the users themselves, both in qualitative as well as in quantitative terms. In other words, from above VPL in the Netherlands looks fairly well organised but from below there are fundamental questions about using VPL and making it more accessible to users.

Dutch principles for VPL

A national system for validation of non-formal and informal learning in the Netherlands commenced in 1998. Under the umbrella-term 'EVC' – which stands for '*Erkenning van Verworven Competenties*' or in English 'Validation of Prior Learning' - such validation was [and still is] intended to take stock of existing knowledge and skills: in other words, rather than being half empty, Dutch VPL takes the view that the glass is half full! This motto is based on a number of basic principles underlying this kind of VPL:

- VPL recognises the fact that learning on the job or via other non-formal learning situations (learning through practical experience) can in principle deliver the same (professional) skills and qualifications as learning within formal (classroom-based) situations.
- Recognition means awarding certificates or diplomas on the basis of a generally recognised standard, such as the qualification structure for professional education. Obviously there are also other standards relating to the labour market which employers and employees regard as relevant. External legitimacy is the key requirement for recognition.
- VPL is not a goal in itself. It contributes to the desire to develop individuals and to strengthen human capital management within companies. It is an important means for realising permanent labour market suitability and deployment.
- For people already in employment, skills can be developed which these individuals do not yet have, but which both they and their employers regard as necessary. In such cases, VPL acts as a reliable yardstick for determining the existing skills and qualifications held by the individual employee. Based on this inventory, a tailor-made training or development path is formulated.
- Rational investment in training by companies and by society as a whole assumes an understanding of existing skills and qualifications, or the stock of skills and qualifications in the company respectively. VPL-procedures make it possible to identify existing skills and qualifications in order to be able subsequently to come to a decision about the investments needed in training.
- VPL-procedures make it possible to visualise the profitability of training by expressing the results of training efforts in terms of a general standard. As when calculating the value of other economic production factors, the identification of the value of skills and qualifications assumes a common and reliable standard in which this value is expressed.
- The provision of flexible or customised training courses assumes that we can gauge a person's existing skills level. VPL can also improve the match between education and the labour market. This applies especially in the case of skills-related training.
- The VPL assessment is designed to assess professional activities. The assessment results provide valuable feedback on the content and methods of the formal learning paths. The training courses are given direct information about the degree to which they succeed in adequately preparing their students for professional practice. This effect is strengthened by the fact that a distinction is made between training and assessment.

Three approaches to VPL

The VPL-system in the Netherlands developed a threefold approach:

- Recognition of prior learning – a formal procedure that leads to the award of a validated portfolio or '*Ervaringsprofiel*',
- Accreditation of prior learning (APL) – a formal procedure in which a candidate can get accreditation of his/her learning outcomes measured against a national qualification standard ('*Ervaringscertificaat*'), and
- Validation of prior learning - the umbrella-term that includes all forms of validation: the two formal ones already mentioned, but also the informal use of VPL by anyone or any organization when trying to link someone's prior learning outcomes to more than a formalized lifelong learning perspective, such as a job-promotion, transition from work-to-work, validation as a volunteer, etc.

So, when the terms 'EVC' or 'VPL' are used in this report, it can mean a formalised form of VPL or a more open, informal use of VPL. The latter use striving to achieve a range of lifelong learning outcomes. The '*Ervaringsprofiel*' and the '*Ervaringscertificaat*' are formal certificates that can only be awarded if they are carried out by accredited 'EVC-suppliers'. These certificates are used to assess and recognise the competences (both vocational and general) of a candidate in relation to sectoral standards (branch or sector qualification), MBO (VET qualification), HBO (HE qualification awarded by universities of applied sciences) and the Open University.

Candidates for the *Ervaringsprofiel* or the *Ervaringscertificaat* can use these certificates in two ways:

- as an independent document, as the basis for further informal or non-formal learning and for career development;
- to obtain exemptions in learning programmes and a partial/full qualification. The *Ervaringscertificaat* can be used by the candidate to request exemptions from the exam committee of a body awarding a qualification. Awarding bodies then decide on whether to grant the exemptions. In theory, a full qualification can be granted if the applicant proved his/her learning outcomes are in line with the expected learning outcomes for this qualification.

Development of VPL in the Netherlands

Different phases in the development of the validation system in the Netherlands can be distinguished:

- Until 2006, the main objective was to encourage the take up of VPL. Government, schools/colleges/universities and social partners (trade unions and employers) focused on creating favorable circumstances for developing and implementing EVC in as many contexts as possible: in work, in voluntary work, in reintegration and job-seeking, in education and training. This approach was the initial responsibility of the Dutch Knowledge Centre on VPL ('*Kenniscentrum EVC*') and focused on the change of the learning culture in general.
- From 2006, a greater focus was put on quality assurance to increase the accessibility and transparency and to guarantee the summative effects by means of certification or qualification. The role of the *Kenniscentrum EVC* changed from overall responsibility for all features of VPL to supporting quality.
- Since 2013, a new change of strategy for validation is taking place in relation to the government's drive towards 'a participation-society' in which all stakeholders have to take ownership and responsibility for their own role in (lifelong) learning. Focus will be on using VPL as a formalised instrument for Validation of Learning Outcomes linked not only to national qualifications but also too sector standards (sector level training, or in the context of the Netherlands post-initial or non-formal learning). This might mean an enlargement of the scope of the two formal terms '*Ervaringsprofiel*' and '*Ervaringscertificaat*'. The new policy is expected to be presented in early 2014 and should broaden validation opportunities for Dutch citizens. The outcome of this re-orientation, is closely linked to making EVC a successful tool in both learning and

employment processes. Another objective is to share ownership of the method and its instruments, such as the use of portfolio, assessment and validation.

2 National perspective on validation

There is an important difference in the definition of formal, informal and non-formal learning between the Netherlands and the EU. This difference relates to the Dutch learning culture in which a strong focus on nationally accredited diplomas or certificates traditionally has had dominance over the learning taking place in sectors or organisations (Lenssen 2011). This has a lot to do with the so-called 'polder-model' in which harmonising the interests of authorities, employers and trade unions are constantly negotiated. This leads to 'political bargaining' on social and economic issues in which the role of education is divided into a responsibility for initial education (the government) and post-initial education ('the market'). The qualifications and validation system has public and private aspects. The strong emphasis on the double character of these systems, where private and public providers interact and supplement each other, is an important defining feature of the qualifications and validation system.

Table 2.1 Formal, Non-formal and Informal Learning in the Netherlands and the EU

	NL	EU
Formal Learning	... is education that leads to a nationally accredited diploma or certificate.	... occurs in an organised and structured context (in a school/training centre or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically leads to qualification or certification
Non-formal learning	... is education that doesn't lead to a nationally recognised diploma or certificate but to a diploma or certificate that is accredited by a professional group or sector.	... is learning which is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support), but which contain an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It normally does not lead to certification
Informal learning	... is experiential learning that occurs 'by doing' or by learning on the job.	... is learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organised or structured (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner's perspective. It typically does not lead to certification

Source: SER 2012, Cedefop 2009

The '*Ervaringsprofiel*' and '*Ervaringscertificaat*' are both formal certificates that can only be awarded if they are carried out by accredited 'EVC-suppliers'. These certificates are used to assess and recognise the competences (both vocational and general) of a candidate in relation to sectoral standards (branch or sector qualification), MBO (VET qualification), HBO (HE qualification awarded by universities of applied sciences) and the Open University. Candidates for the *Ervaringsprofiel* or the *Ervaringscertificaat* can use these certificates:

- as an independent document, as the basis for further informal or non-formal learning and for career development;

- to obtain exemptions in learning programmes and a partial/full qualification. The *Ervaringscertificaat* can be used by the candidate to request exemptions from the exam committee of a body awarding a qualification. Awarding bodies then decide on whether to grant the exemptions. In theory, a full qualification can be granted if the applicant proves his/her learning outcomes are in line with the expected learning outcomes for this qualification.

2.2 National legal framework, system or policy on validation

National policy

With the publication of *De Fles is Half Vol!* ("The glass is half full!") in 2000, the first step towards lifelong learning using the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL; EVC or *Erkenning van Verworven Competenties* in Dutch) was taken in the Netherlands. With 'accreditation' the focus in the policy laid initially on accrediting prior learning outcomes against national qualification standards. Until 2006 this 'narrow' approach to prior learning outcomes was the prevailing one.

With the change of focus by EVC to quality-assurance in 2006, the Dutch government started to stimulate and subsidise the development of a national infrastructure for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. This meant that a 'wider' approach to utilizing prior learning outcomes was chosen. The Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) became the main focus and broadened the perspective of capitalising on prior learning outcomes. This approach included not only linkages to national qualifications but also to sector standards, function profiles, career-paths and citizenship-activities. This was one of the reasons the Interdepartmental Project Unit for Learning & Working (PLW) was set up. The broader aim was to stimulate adult learning and to enlarge the accessibility and flexibility of formal education for adults. The aim in 2014 is still to boost adult learning in combination with work, without focusing specifically on one or more key skills, but rather on programmes combining work and study that lead to a qualification and better opportunities in the job market. The *Ervaringscertificaat* is used to assess and recognise prior learning competences. The presumed broadening from APL to VPL in 2014 is expected to widen the perspective EVC brings to Dutch citizens.

National system

In 2000, a national working group on validation of prior learning formulated a broad vision on EVC and the implementation process. EVC had to bridge the gap between education supply and demand on the labour market side. The challenge was to connect these two worlds via the learner, on the one hand by converting learning experiences into certificates or diplomas, and on the other by allowing for the development of competences in a career context (Werkgroep EVC, 2000).

Legal Framework

Legal provisions on the validation of non-formal and informal learning in the Netherlands are embedded in education laws relating to VET and HE:

- In the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector, the Law on Adult & Vocational Education (WEB, 1996) was the first law where the foundations were laid for what was formally developed later in 1998 as EVC-policy in the Netherlands.
- In Higher Education, the law "*Wet of het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek*" (WHW - law on higher education and scientific research) regulates the admission and exemption policy based on validation. Higher education institutes are left free to translate this regulation per study in the "*Onderwijs en examenreglementen*" (OERs - rules on education and exams).

Apart from using EVC as an instrument for awarding exemptions for higher education programmes, it can also be used for admittance to higher education. Adults aged over 21 who do not meet the formal entry requirements can undergo a formal procedure called the '21+test', which tests the required level in Dutch, English and the specific subject of the programme. There are a number of institutions which state that an EVC procedure can be used to replace this test.

It is important to note that the use of EVC is only possible in higher vocational education (HBO) and not in universities, apart from the Open University.

As explained in the introduction, validation of non-formal and informal learning in the Netherlands consists of two formal instruments:

- The '*Ervaringscertificaat*'. This is the formal procedure in which a candidate can get accreditation of his/her learning outcomes when measured against a national qualification standard. It is a summative approach; a portfolio is referred to a specific national qualification standard and the accreditation consists of a number of credits that can be cashed in at a qualifying institute or school. This form can be called *Accreditation of Prior Learning (EVC)*. The outcome – the '*Ervaringscertificaat*' – is not the award itself but an official certificate with the described competences that can be awarded by the exam committee of the chosen standard. Therefore, in the Netherlands there is a kind of 'firewall' between accrediting prior learning outcomes and awarding the accredited learning outcomes in terms of exemptions for a qualification or for a full qualification.
- The '*Ervaringsprofiel*'. This procedure sets up a personal portfolio. It is a formative approach aimed at validation of all the generic competences of a candidate. It advises on the possible opportunities for accreditation or personal development steps. It also points out what to do when a specific qualification or diploma is at stake. This form can be called *Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)*, or in Dutch HVC or *Herkennen van Verworven Competenties*.

2.3 Skills audits

As mentioned in the introduction, since 2013, a new change of strategy for validation is taking place in relation to the government's drive towards more responsibility for stakeholders in (lifelong) learning and thus validation. Social partners focus on their labour market responsibilities. The authorities take care of the individuals and groups that need special attention. In line with this development, the national strategy towards EVC is changing in 2013. The focus of government's role will change towards overseeing the quality of and access to EVC, in the context of a system emphasising the validation of learning outcomes for two EVC-perspectives:

- Validation/EVC of non-formal learning (sector certificates). The stakeholders in the labour market will be responsible for organising these validation procedures themselves, including quality assurance.
- Validation/EVC with the intention getting a diploma in formal education. Institutes of formal education are responsible for the procedures and therefore will be under control of the Inspectorate of Education. The learning objectives as supported by EVC can differ and the outcome of EVC can have both a formal and non-formal learning impact (further learning).

These forms of EVC can be considered as different kinds of skills audits: they focus on the validation of prior - formal, non-formal and informal - learning outcomes in order to find out if there is a possible link between a personal learning biography and a social-economic purpose in society. In the Netherlands it more appropriate to speak of a competences-audit since competences embrace skills, knowledge and attitude as denominators.

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

Qualifications and qualification frameworks

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science commissioned in 2011 the development of the Dutch Qualifications Framework (NLQF) which was undertaken in close cooperation with experts and stakeholders in the field of education and training. The National Coordination Point (NCP) of the NLQF (active from 1st February 2012) is an independent body which is responsible for the development and implementation of the NLQF.

The NLQF aims to facilitate student and labour market mobility by providing an insight into the levels of all qualifications recorded by the NCP NLQF in the NCP register. The NLQF provides transparency in that it facilitates a comparison of qualification levels nationally and, thus, national mobility (www.nlqf.nl). Qualifications are classified in NLQF levels and are given a level indication. The framework consists of an Entry Level followed by 8 levels, Level 1 being the least complex (basic education) and Level 8 the most complex (Master's degree). The NLQF is referenced to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

The Government-regulated qualifications (the qualifications of the Ministries of Education Culture and Sciences; Healthcare, Welfare and Sports and Economics Affairs) are all incorporated in the NLQF. All other qualifications are first assessed and the level determined on request of the owner of the qualification (often a private supplier of education) by the NCP and then recorded in the NCP Register.

All courses in vocational secondary education are entered into the Central Register of Vocational Courses (CREBO, *Centraal Register Beroepsopleidingen*). This register records which institutions provide which courses, what the exit qualifications are, which learning pathway is involved and which of the partial qualifications awarded are subject to external validation. It also indicates which courses are funded by the government and which bodies are authorised to validate examinations. The CREBO encompasses all NLQF-levels from 1-4.

All accredited programmes in higher education are listed in the Central Register of Higher Education Study Programmes (CROHO, *Centraal Register Opleidingen Hoger Onderwijs*). The CROHO encompasses all NLQF-levels from 5-8.

There is a strong link between EVC and the national qualifications framework in terms of validating skills and competences: the NLQF on the level of the qualification and EVC on the level of the individual. The qualifications framework also offers providers of qualifications which are not regulated by the Government the possibility of having such training programmes and qualifications classified at a level of the NLQF. Procedures and criteria for this process are in place.

Credit systems

With the implementation of the NLQF, students in VET and HE will have additional opportunities for linking to the levels of the national qualifications framework by means of their further, post-initial learning. This is important because it gives their initial qualification an internationally recognised level. It also provides support for managing their own lifelong learning, by recognising learning experiences which have taken place since the completion of formal schooling with the assistance of the validation methodology of EVC.

Awarding credits for exemptions in terms of modules or qualifications depends first of all on the purpose of engaging in an EVC-procedure. (Is it for initial qualification or for post-initial purposes like updating/upgrading a qualification-level or even for accounting for formative career steps?). The second issue relates to whether the opportunities for credits are offered by the VET-school or the university. The latter depends primarily on the way different institutes have built up their curriculum: modularised or concentric. In modularised curricula exemptions are easier to award than in concentric curricula.

Standards

An EVC procedure can be used to assess and recognise the competences (both vocational and general) of a candidate in relation to the standards (finishing levels) of an internal or sector standard (branch or sector qualification), MBO (VET qualification), HBO (HE qualification in universities of applied science and the Open University) qualification. This assessment results in an *Ervaringscertificaat*. This certificate can be used as an independent document that proves the value of the experiences measured in terms of a qualification. Candidates are free to choose what they want to do with their certificate (career development or further learning).

As mentioned all government regulated qualifications are incorporated in the NLQF. All other qualifications are first assessed and the level determined by the NCP and then

recorded in the NCP Register. The NCP opens up - in theory - all standards (national and sectoral) and makes it possible to link them to personal formal, non-formal and informal learning outcomes that are validated and reported in an *Ervaringscertificaat*.

Qualifications in branches, VET and HE (only bachelors of professional universities - HBO) are translated into competences and for many qualifications put into a VPL-procedure. Notably, VET is based on a learning outcomes approach in theory. This is called the competence-base of VET in which all national standards embedded in VET are formulated in terms of competences. In January 2012 the final step was taken to turn VET into a vocational-oriented learning system based on skills and competences (Wetten, 2012).

In theory a full diploma can be granted on the basis of EVC if the applicant can prove his or her learning outcomes are in line with the expected learning outcomes of a diploma. In practice this is very difficult for schools and universities to implement. For VET-schools there are better opportunities for candidates to get access to and exemptions from a specific programme. This is because VET is based on a national qualification system in which all diplomas are based on the same competences across the country. For universities it is different due to their autonomy in designing their own learning pathways for obtaining nationally agreed learning outcomes.

In many sectors EVC is part of the human resources management (HRM) approach. The focus lies on sustainable employability and mobility of labour. The use of VPL is strongly linked to these initiatives in which sector programmes for non-formal learning are used as standards in the VPL-process. The next step in this process is making links between national and sector standards through the Dutch Qualifications Framework (NLQF).

2.5 National Institutional Framework

The [Kenniscentrum](http://www.kenniscentrum.nl/)¹, after its initial role in stimulating the development and implementation of EVC, is now the main institution responsible for supporting the Quality Code for EVC (based on a national covenant). Since June 2012 a national tripartite covenant, signed by the Ministry of Education, the trade unions and the employers' organisations, broadened the tasks allocated to the Kenniscentrum (Staatscourant, 2012). As well as its quality assurance role, outlined in the Quality Code, the new covenant sets out objectives relating to stimulating the actual usage of EVC, to implement EVC as a labour market and guidance tool and to also incorporate sector standards into the EVC-process. The covenant offers a national framework for the further design and implementation of validation. Both government and social partners take responsibility for the development of EVC.

The scope of the Quality Code has been extended since the summative use (i.e. the qualification-approach of the *Ervaringscertificaat*) of EVC) now links personal portfolios to standards in VET or HE and to sectoral level standards or qualifications. In this way EVC focuses on awarding exemptions and offers access to qualifications that are recognised on the labour market. This access both affects publicly-funded as well as privately-funded education, as long as they supply national accredited standards in VET and HE.

It is clearly necessary to keep track of national and international developments such as changes concerning the Quality Code, the validation of sector standards and implementation through the labour market and guidance tool in the Register of the NCP. In order to discuss these experiences, the covenant partners organise an annual meeting with other national stakeholders in education, training and career guidance.

2.6 Governance and allocation of responsibilities

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

Responsibilities are divided amongst a range of stakeholders:

¹ <http://www.kenniscentrumEVC.nl/>

- Government

The government focuses on the quality of EVC and the EVC system. The government stimulates the use of EVC through a communication campaign on the *Ervaringscertificaat*², a fiscal facility for EVC, the Kenniscentrum EVC, platforms with experts and companies, research and broadening the scope of EVC. With the exception of the fiscal facility, these tasks are shared with the social partners (the 'covenant-partners'). As mentioned earlier the Government is reconsidering its role in relation to the two ways of validation.

- Social partners

The social partners in the Netherlands traditionally negotiate with the government on all aspects concerning the regulation of the labour market. This includes division of responsibilities in the learning market; initial education and training of jobseekers are the primary responsibility of the government and the training of employees is the primary responsibility of the social partners. This therefore also affects the introduction of EVC-systems for employees and jobseekers (Eurydice, Cedefop, ETF, 2003).

The social partners are so-called 'covenant-partners', meaning they take responsibility together with the government for promoting and maintaining a high quality national system of EVC.

Social partners stimulate the use of EVC through collective labour agreements. Employees have the right to EVC in certain collective labour agreements. In collective labour agreements the social partners in specific sectors also agree that Training and Development funds can be used for the valuation of personal competences of employees. Sometimes they even agree on using the fund for giving learning vouchers to the employees. The Training and Development fund provides the portfolio models, internal assessors and guidance. Since the end of the 1990s, many sectors (e.g. house painting industry, meat industry, construction industry, process industry, education, public services, the care sector), have set up initiatives regarding EVC at their (sector) level. In most cases social partners, sector organisations and accredited EVC-providers are involved in setting up EVC procedures.

- The education associations

The Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (HBO-raad), the Netherlands Association of Vocational Education and Training Centres (MBO-raad), the Council for Agricultural Education Centres (AOC-raad) and the Open University stimulated the use and the quality of the *Ervaringscertificaat* until 2012. With the strong focus on quality-assurance by the Inspection of Education since that year, most VET-schools and universities of applied sciences did not renew their accreditation as EVC-provider. The education associations followed this process and stressed the fact that EVC could only be applied properly when the examination boards of [each qualification of] schools and universities could account for the credibility of access to and/or exemptions for qualifications on the basis of an *Ervaringscertificaat*.

- Foundation for Cooperation on Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market - Stichting Samenwerking Beroepsonderwijs Bedrijfsleven (SBB)

The agreements on the degree requirements of VET are set out in qualification dossiers which are steered by the SBB. Educational institutions in VET base their qualifications on these dossiers. The dossiers are used for tasks in vocational guidance, formulating vocational training (internships) and linking into the *Ervaringscertificaat*.

2.6.2 Explain more specifically the role of different stakeholders

Providers of EVC

When registered in the Quality Code for EVC, any organisation may offer EVC-procedures that can lead to a formal *Ervaringscertificaat*. This registration process entails a number of

² The campaign does not encompass the *Ervaringsprofiel*, since this form of EVC has been used mainly by job-agencies to guide an individual through changes he/ she might need to make to improve his/ her employability.

steps concerning the quality of the process offered, the quality of staff involved, and the independence of the organisation (Kenniscentrum EVC 2006):

1. The goal of EVC is to define, evaluate and accredit individual competencies. The accreditation of prior learning has a value in and of itself and contributes to employability. In many cases, EVC can be a benefit to further career-related personal development.
2. Individual entitlements: the EVC process answers to the need of the individual. Entitlements and arrangements with the EVC-offering organisations are clearly defined.
3. Procedure and instruments are reliable and based on solid standards. Trust is the key issue. Trust has to do with civil effect, properly defined standards, and clear information on the way in which assessments are conducted and the arguments on the basis of which conclusions are drawn.
4. Assessors and supervisors are competent, independent and impartial. Independence and impartiality are crucial factors in the evaluation and are rooted in the roles and responsibilities of the assessors involved in the process. It is of major importance to avoid unnecessary confusion of roles. Impartiality can be reinforced by training and the use of networks.
5. The quality of APL³ procedures is guaranteed and is being improved on an ongoing basis. The quality of the APL procedure and the set of instruments used is guaranteed.

Evaluations are conducted regularly. The results are incorporated into improvement actions.

Since the formal EVC-procedure is taking place independently from the awarding of exemptions or full qualifications, both public and private organisations can be registered as an official EVC-provider or supplier.

Auditing organisations assess the performance of the providers on a regular basis and provide statements on the implementation of the Quality Code in the policy and the performance of the providers.

Formal education and training sector

Any official (or formal?) EVC-procedure results in an *Ervaringscertificaat*. This certificate describes the advice of the assessors concerning the value of someone's portfolio related to the chosen standard in the EVC-procedure. The candidate can use this report to ask the exam committee of an institute (school, university, training institute) either to access a learning programme, to obtain exemptions or to receive a full certificate/diploma.

In VET and Higher Education, the autonomous institutions decide for themselves how to use the results of EVC procedures (the extent to which these results lead to exemptions or a diploma). The government plays no part in this, but does ensure that the procedures meet quality assurance standards.

Private sector

Thanks to EVC, in almost all sectors, recruitment and selection of personnel is increasingly also covering target groups without the formal requirements. EVC is also used to address formative issues such as retention of personnel or outplacement (from 'work to work') and employability.

The role of the private sector in EVC is related to activities such as financing and raising awareness within sectors and companies or acting as EVC-providers.

Training Funds often finance agreements on EVC. Both employees and employers pay a small amount of their incomes to these sector funds, which were originally set up to support educational initiatives for employees (Duvekot et al, 2005).

³ Whenever APL is mentioned in this report, this is solely linked to national qualifications. This entails therefore the 'narrow' utilisation of prior learning outcomes whereas VPL is designed to offer the broader perspective of not just linkages to national qualifications but also to sector standards, function profiles, etc.

In addition, private sector institutions may just like public institutions offer EVC if they are registered as an EVC provider with the Knowledge Centre and adhere to the quality code. There are currently 69 organisations providing EVC (Register EVC, 2013).

A good example of a prize-winning initiative in the private sector – based on a multi-stakeholder collaboration – is provided by the Rockwool Group in Roermond, the Netherlands.

EVC at Rockwool

The Rockwool Group is the world's leading supplier of innovative products and systems based on stone wool. Since the 1990s learning is a key element in the human resource management-policy of Rockwool. In the Dutch plant in Roermond this HRM-policy can be regarded as an ongoing process of linking learning and working for each individual employee by means of competence-steered assessment methods and work-based development-programmes:

- Assessment is considered as a summative and a formative method for enhancing performance of not only the employees for the company but also of the company for the employees.
- Learning goals are oriented towards employability and qualification on the one hand for strengthening the working-processes, and on the other hand for creating empowerment and opening up internal/external career-opportunities for the employees.
- Development is focused on facilitating learning trajectories that are beneficial for employability, personal development and internal/external career-steps of the employees.
- EVC is the method for linking the potential of employees with the need for competences. It is utilised as a multi-targeted method for sustainable HRM.

On October 15, 2013 Rockwool was awarded in Brussels the Observal-Net European Prize for Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning, in the category of *Work Based Competence Development and Recognition*.

Source: www.observal-net.eu (<http://www.observal-net.eu/content/work-based-competence-development-and-recognition>)

Outflow and outplacement of personnel also benefit from validation. For instance in the military there is a high proportion of employees with fixed-term appointments. To be more successful at placing these employees on the labour market, EVC can offer both development and qualification. Likewise, in mergers and reorganisations, EVC offers development and qualifications to find the right place for personnel, whether internally or externally.

As shown above, private sector stakeholders play an important role in the implementation of validation in the Netherlands. A number of key learning points can be identified from experience to date in this sector:

- Collaboration between companies and educational establishments is essential to ensure that work-based learning can be customised following the EVC procedure. Companies have to facilitate and in particular provide guidance in workplace learning, and educational establishments must accept and value the workplace as a learning environment.
- Employees need to be as self-reliant and programme-independent as possible in the development of their personal development programmes following an EVC procedure. In this sense, it is up to the individual to make choices concerning the degree of self-determination or external direction within the development programme. These choices range between 100 % self-determination of form and content of the programme (*empowerment*) and 0 % (*pampering*).
- A more customer-centred orientation of education institutions towards organisations/businesses is promoted by the ministry in order to help anchor EVC in Human Resource Development. On the other hand, increased formulation of demands is needed from organisations/businesses in order to help anchor EVC in the policy of educational institutions (Beleidsreactie 2012).

- Organisations/ companies must ensure that their formulation of demands is effective. Formulation of demands means that there is clarity concerning (1) the competences present within the organisation, and (2) the required competencies within the framework of the organisational aims. A match can be made between (1) and (2), so that (3) the competency demands within the organisation and ultimately (4), an action plan for the validation and development of available competences, as well as those that need to be developed, emerges. Good examples of this integral approach are offered by Rockwool, the sector of municipal personnel and the agricultural sector (AGF).
- Research is needed into the added value of EVC, among other things focussed on its economic, financial and social effects and also the relation with other assessment systems (e.g. in-company, social, etc.). (Observal-Net 2012)

The third sector

The Netherlands Centre for Social Development, MOVISIE (in their capacity as research institute for the voluntary sector), developed an EVC-procedure for volunteers. The EVC procedure consists of a portfolio for the volunteer and two manuals (one for the supervisor and one for the assessor). In addition MOVISIE developed a specific procedure for social relief workers⁴.

MOVISIE also commissioned intriguing research into the value of EVC for 'vulnerable volunteers'. It was found that EVC as a social intervention tool was successfully implemented for the target group of 'vulnerable volunteers' in society: people with a mental and/or physical vulnerability and who are at a considerable distance from the labour market (Michon, et al, 2013). Vulnerable people increase their employment opportunities by undertaking voluntary work. The general competences that they can bring into the picture, provide guidance and insight into their social and economic chances. People who go through the entire EVC-process score highly after 12 months, on various aspects of empowerment, such as hope and confidence. This leads to a more active attitude and openness to new challenges. With this method, volunteers literally prove what they are capable of.

2.6.3 Coordination between stakeholders

The effectiveness of coordination between stakeholders in EVC is strengthened with the Covenant of 2012. Coordination is also expected to be further strengthened when the new policy is established with the focus on turning EVC into an instrument for Validation of Learning Outcomes on (1) national qualification level and on (2) sector level training. With the review of the system, the stakeholders in the Covenant will be responsible for the coordination of validation/EVC for the labour market.

2.7 Examples of national regional, local or EU funded initiatives

- **The building sector** has taken full control of the EVC-process and EVC is an integral part of the sectoral career policy. Each employee, covered by the collective labour agreement for the sector, is entitled to a career-guided trajectory once every five years. Besides that right, the employee is also allowed to use preferred suppliers of EVC-procedures at six VET-schools. Both the employee and the employer can take the initiative for implementing this offer. Fundeon – a member of the SBB for the sector – executes the EVC-procedures on behalf of the sector. It also 'buys' or arranges tailor-made learning services at the VET-schools or other affiliated training institutes for following up advice of the EVC-procedures. Follow-up means filling in the remaining modules for qualification in the CREBO-register in order for the employees to update or upgrade their craftsmanship. *Fundeon* supports the employees in the EVC-process and completes the network of regional VET-schools or training institutes for the employees to fill in their tailor-made trajectories in their own region. Fundeon only allows learning services from schools and institutes that accept the *Ervaringscertificaat*. The teachers from the VET-schools act as assessors in the EVC-procedure. In this process, Fundeon actually build up a community

⁴ <http://www.movisie.nl/publicaties/EVC-procedure-vrijwilligerswerk>

of practice in which the professionals from EVC providers and the teachers/trainer know and trust each other. (EVC in de markt, 2013).

- The police-organisation in the region Limburg-Noord developed, in cooperation with Fontys Hogescholen, an EVC-procedure on level 6 of the NLQF. It is used to obtain an overview of the skills and competences of its staff. EVC is operated mainly as a career tool. More insight into competences leads to more motivated people and helps them to make earlier and faster steps forward in their career. This career focus stems from a vision on working with generally accepted values such as 'security', 'connectivity' and 'trust'. In this context, EVC is used as an instrument of competence-management of the local organizations/teams, for the development of annual interviews and also career planning. Between 2007-2012 more than 150 police officers participated in an EVC-procedure.

Research into the function of EVC as a career tool clearly shows the difference in career progression between people with and without an *Ervaringscertificaat*. It seems very likely that EVC reveals some key competencies, and that this "transparency" in effect identifies career steps. The opportunities people see for themselves in the labour market are clearly better than those of the employees who have no *Ervaringscertificaat*. The effect of the first EVC groups yielded a number of important recommendations (Profit Wise 2012):

1. Everyone who participates in an EVC-procedure should in principle receive an *Ervaringscertificaat*.
2. Employees clearly indicate that they would like to see EVC continued as an instrument of career-policy in the Police Corps, and that they greatly appreciate the involvement of the (direct) manager in their career-management. Guidance and evaluation is therefore in the interest of both the organisation and the employee.

The Welfare sector provides a good example of EVC embedded in HRM-policies of welfare-institutions. In 2011-2012 a pilot project on EVC and tailor-made learning was initiated. The project focuses on the mobility/promotion from group leader to senior group leader in the Welfare sector. Prior work experience and learning outcomes are assessed and recognised in a VPL procedure, using both sector standards as well as HE qualifications (Ervaring, 2012). An examination committee of the university evaluates the VPL-report of the candidate that he/she obtained in the VPL-procedure as part of the intake for a qualification-programme (including portfolio and assessment). The aim of this evaluation is two-fold. First to directly obtain the HE-qualification that is linked to the sector-standard for senior group leader; or secondly to obtain a tailor-made learning programme, taking into account prior learning outcomes and filling in the remaining learning targets in the HE-programme.

Fifteen candidates from one youth care institute participated in the VPL-programme. Of these, 13 received an VPL-report (or in formal Dutch procedure 'a national experience certificate' that is obligatory when accessing HE by means of VPL). This report is the basis for programming further development and learning for the candidate. On top of this, the candidates could also receive a sector-certificate if they complied with all criteria in the sector-standard. Only one candidate received this certificate during the pilot-phase.

The EVC-procedure was managed by an EVC-manager from the university, two portfolio-advisers (from the university and from the employer) and two assessors (internal-university and external-sector).

The exam committee from the department of Pedagogics (Professional HE) acknowledged the sector-standard as a relevant standard to match with the HE-standard of Pedagogics. A matrix for general comparison was designed and used by the exam committee. Furthermore, all stakeholders acknowledged the relevance and value of both standards (sector and national) and the steps in the VPL-process.

This project is interesting because it offers recognition in higher professional education qualifications for experienced youth workers. Furthermore, it is interesting because of the use of VPL in a multiple targeted policy for employability (formative) and qualification (summative). This multiple-targeted VPL is used at the welfare-institute for linking two purposes:

1. The purpose of addressing an employee's learning needs (knowing how to invest best in yourself),
 2. For creating horizontal and/or vertical employability chances (knowing where to go to your best).
- The International Women's Centre (IVC)⁵ in Den Helder aims to contribute to the emancipation, participation and integration of migrant women in the Netherlands. One of the activities of the IVC is the provision of training for self-management of competences. The aim is to teach women to get a good grip on their personal skills and competences for the sake of empowerment and to find their way in Dutch society. The outcomes of the training can be used for setting up career opportunities in further learning, in volunteering and paid work and for embedding their personal life in a country with different cultural customs. The training also raises awareness of the women's personal values.

The training is arranged according to the Swiss CH-Q method (a Swiss vocational qualifications programme that has developed tools to document skills). CH-Q follows the steps of the EVC-procedure: raising awareness, documentation, presentation, assessment and certification.

The main focus of CH-Q is to enable individuals to manage their own careers, articulate their own development needs and build up their own competencies. After passing the training and presenting their personal action plan, the students receive an approved certificate. The CH-Q training has been offered since 2009 and is successfully continued every year (see www.ch-q.nl for more detail). The training is offered twice a year; since 2009, 45 women participated in the training; of this group, many found jobs (paid and voluntary work) or started up a study programme at a VET-school or university.

- The Europass- and the Youthpass initiatives are promoted in the Netherlands as tools for making one's skills and competences more transparent and comparable between sectors. Target groups are people looking for a job, and/or looking for training or a learning experience abroad.

- Europass

The basis of the Europass is the CV which someone can supplement as he/she wishes with documents relating to language skills, (international) work placements and qualifications. The result is a clear presentation which increases people's chances to access and develop with respect to the labour market (www.europass.nl). The number of downloads of Europass CVs increased by 10% in 2013. (<http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/en/resources/statistics>).

- Europass for volunteers

In the Netherlands a Europass Mobility document for volunteers is given to individuals who have been or are active in voluntary work. The Europass Mobility document for volunteers can help to explain what a volunteer has learned during a period of voluntary activities. It gives a clear and objective description of the work carried out. The employer appoints the experience gained by the volunteer and highlights his or her qualities. In this way, he/she is able to present him/herself better and obtain a better position on the labour market.

⁵ www.int-vrouwencentrum.nl

The document is signed by a volunteer agency and the hosting partner (where the voluntary work takes place). The period, type of work and the skills and competences gained are recorded in the document. The awareness of the availability of these tools, and a willingness to use them to support validation initiatives, is slowly but surely rising. There is still however a long way to go in incorporating the initiatives into strategies for learning and career guidance. The number of documents for volunteers issued in 2013 was 270.

– ‘Europass inland mobility’

The Dutch National Europass Centre has initiated pilots to use ‘Europass inland mobility’ as a tool to document competences/skills acquired through volunteering. Based on these pilots, one project has anticipated the transition from ‘Europass inland mobility’ to ‘Europass experience’ (as part of the European Skills Passport). The project Scouting Gelderland is developing support and guiding tools for volunteer organisations that want to offer ‘Europass experience’ to their volunteers and implement it in their policy. This project will run until summer 2015 is carried out in close cooperation with the Dutch National Europass Centre and partners from Ireland, Czech Republic, Poland, and Cyprus, and with support of the European Volunteer Centre.

– Youthpass

Youthpass is the European tool to improve the recognition of learning outcomes of young people and youth workers/leaders from their participation in projects supported by the EU Youth in Action2 Programme. Certificates can be obtained by participants in several Actions and sub-Actions of the Youth in Action Programme. The number of organisations in the Netherlands that are issuing Youthpass-certificates rose from 61 in 2010 to 74 in 2013. The number of certificates issued to young people rose from 15 in 2007 to 1291 in 2012⁶.

2.8 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

2.8.1 Funding

EVC is financed in different ways by different stakeholders, depending on the context in which EVC is applied.

Employees

EVC is financed by individual employers and/or Sectoral Training and Development Funds.

Larger companies (with more than 500 employees) which have incorporated EVC into their human resource management (HRM), self-finance the application of EVC.

Many SMEs are supported in the application of EVC by the sectoral training funds, originally set up to support educational initiatives for employees in the sector (Duvekot et al, 2005). A good example of such a sector-steered model is offered by the A+O Fonds Gemeenten (Training fund for city-workers). The costs for EVC in the sector vary from EUR 700-1,500. Part of these costs are tax-deductible for the employer; on top of this the Fund covers an amount of EUR 1,000 per employee when EVC is part of a career-guided trajectory, providing that the employee has not been involved in a similar trajectory in the last three years. (A+O, 2013).

In 2013, the government and the social partners agreed on a joint sector-approach. The government will co-finance sector plans for revitalising the specific sector with an annual budget of EUR 300 million for the coming two years. In total this amounts to a budget for co-financing of EUR 600 million in 2014-2015 (SZW, 2013). The extent to which this budget will also be used for further developing and implementing VPL-strategies depends on the plans the sectors are designing. In general VPL will benefit due to its overall recognised status of ‘a bridge between a personal portfolio and an existing or future task within a sector’. However there is in most sectors a strong emphasis on educating young people. So it is not sure if and how validation/VPL will benefit from this revitalisation. Furthermore, most sectors

⁶ Youthpass Impact Study, <https://www.youthpass.eu/nl/youthpass/downloads/youthpass-impact-study/>

and their sector training funds – which will be used for co-financing these sector plans – are very familiar with EVC.

Together the government and the social partners identified seven themes that are expected to contribute to a better structural functioning of the labour market and also have positive impact in the short term. A sector plan must address at least two of the seven themes. An example is to improve long-term employability through career scans, staff pools between companies so that employees do not need to be made redundant unnecessarily, EVC and apprenticeships for young people. From 1 October 2013, sectors can submit their plans to the Ministry. A sector plan has a maximum duration of two years from the date of the grant.

Jobseekers

A temporary measure taken by the government in 2009 (UWV, 2013) supports jobseekers to access EVC. Employers who need to make redundancies because of the economic crisis can offer the employees concerned a procedure for an *Ervaringscertificaat* or an *Ervaringsprofiel*. The scheme is targeted at three different specific groups: young unemployed persons without a starting qualification, the unemployed and employed people at risk of losing their jobs. For the young unemployed, only those who do not hold a Level 2 vocational qualification are eligible. The other two groups can use the measure to access qualifications up to the level of HBO, to support their mobility on the labour market. The cost of this procedure is subsidised by the employment agencies, UWV. The amount is limited to EUR 600 for an *Ervaringsprofiel* and EUR 1,300 for an *Ervaringscertificaat*. Depending on the number of employees of the company, half of the costs are subsidised (more than 25 employees) or all costs (less than 25 employees) are subsidised.

EVC in the learning context

To a certain extent EVC has been embedded in the programming of VET-schools (ROCs) and universities of applied sciences (HE). Also the Open University offers EVC in some of its programmes⁷. Some VET schools and universities also hold a licence as accredited EVC-providers.

In the case of getting access to and exemptions for a diploma-programme by means of an *Ervaringscertificaat*, the candidate needs to secure his/her own funding for EVC because EVC is only allowed as an instrument for access and exemptions when the candidate has not yet entered the programme. This means that the candidate has to organise his/her own funding for EVC; the exemptions take effect once the student enrolls in the programme.

2.8.2 Distribution of costs

As noted above (Section 2.7.1), EVC is financed in different ways by different stakeholders.

A number of other general comments can be made in relation to the costs to organisations of implementing EVC:

- EVC is a commercial activity (when used in the framework of the EVC Quality Code). This means that public organisations cannot use their government funding for EVC. Compensation for EVC (procedure, assessment) is possible through:
 - Subsidies for employers based on the legal arrangement described in section 2.7
 - Fiscal facilities (such as income tax relief on costs for education) for employees and unemployed persons looking for jobs.
- Many Collective Labour Agreements in the sectors include a paragraph on compensation for employers and/or employees, using EVC.

When EVC is not funded by the government or the social partners, the individual user can fiscally deduct the costs for EVC. All costs above EUR 500 are tax-deductible.

EVC is meant to prevent unnecessary learning; in this way any investment in an EVC procedure is about lowering the real costs of learning, as stipulated with the publication of the national policy concerning EVC in the Netherlands in 2000 under the title of 'The glass is half full'.

⁷ The Open University is the only academic university in the Netherlands that has experimented with validation.

2.8.3 Data on flows of beneficiaries

The number of *Ervaringscertificaten* has increased during the last few years, from 9,900 in 2007 to 12,500 in 2008 and 15,700 in 2009. This meant that in the period 2007-2009 the number of awarded *Ervaringscertificaten* grew by more than 60%. These quantitative data on the actual use of EVC in the Netherlands can be divided into two groups:

1. User groups at MBO-levels (VET-schools, branch or sector qualifications),
2. User groups at HBO-level (Universities of applied science).
3. User groups of Qualifications in branches

The majority of these certificates were issued on MBO-levels, with an estimated share of 80-90%.

The MBO user group uses the *Ervaringscertificaat* to obtain a diploma at an MBO-level, to gain access to a MBO-diploma programme or to get access to and exemptions for an MBO-diploma-programme.

The HBO user group uses the *Ervaringscertificaat* to obtain access to and exemptions for an HBO-diploma-programme (bachelor-level).

Factors that have stimulated demand for the *Ervaringscertificaat* are the interest of employees, government measures to stimulate demand and the interest of employers.

The demand for the *Ervaringscertificaat* reached its highest number in 2010 with 22,300 EVC-procedures. This number dropped down to 17,900 in 2011 due to the crisis. (Ecorys, 2012).

The majority of all EVC in 2011 – about 65% - was at the MBO-level of branch, or sector, qualifications. These qualifications are developed and accredited within the sector but are not part of the national (funded) qualification structure. VET and VET-related training (also MBO-levels or NLQF-levels 1-4) accounted for more than 25% and EVC at universities of applied sciences for 10% of all EVC in 2011.

2.8.4 Evidence of benefits to individuals

EVC leading to an *Ervaringscertificaat* can be used:

- as the basis for further informal or non-formal development of the individual,
- in the labour market for further career building,
- for a qualification through a diploma when the individual has met all the required learning outcomes that were defined for this qualification,
- as a document to gain exemptions in education, if not all required learning outcomes were met and the individual does not wish to attend formal education and training again.

While the majority of providers conducts in practice only a summative VPL, a formative assessment (which is the variant of the more open form of VPL) can also be used in the context of career development with the aim of identifying training needs and adjusting training programmes accordingly.

The benefits of EVC are considered high, especially when the EVC-process not only covers summative but also formative effects. Although the summative VPL still holds its value, the formative VPL is slowly but gradually developing. State of the art research shows that the summative aims and (potential) benefits are still the main priority of both organisations as well as individuals (Profitwise, 2011; Ecorys, 2012; EVC in de markt, 2013), but the utilisation of formative steered EVC is growing in importance. In general the role and value of EVC in the Netherlands is considered very valuable for objectives of (further) development of people in both learning and working contexts.

3 Information, advice and guidance

3.1 Awareness-raising and recruitment

Providing information about EVC is mainly performed at the bottom-level of learning and working processes for the benefit of workers, jobseekers, volunteers, 'private lifers', etc. In practice awareness-raising activities are targeted at specific target groups: minorities, jobseekers, youth-groups, special needs groups.

Raising awareness of the need and opportunities for lifelong learning for individuals in any given context is at the heart of the process of validating learning. Without this, learning will remain school or company-led and cannot effectively be based on individuals' motivations and ambitions. In particular, the '*Ervaringsprofiel*' is used for generating motivation for looking into one's development so far and answering the question of what the next step is going to be in this development.

Most of all, an individual has to be self-aware of his/her own competences, of the value to himself/herself of these competences and the value they have for others at a particular point in time and place. Being able to keep up your competences in a 'made-to-measure way' is vital for this understanding.

For organisations it is vital to understand that investing in 'their' people also means investing in the goals of the own organisation. This awareness needs to develop by setting specific targets for investment in individuals and support the organisation can give to human resource development. Research found that individuals with support of a HRD manager were more successful in reaching the goals of both individual and the organisation.

3.2 Role of information, advice and guidance networks/ institutions

EVC-providers generally have the obligation to offer good information and advice on why, how and when to enter a validation-procedure. In practice information and guidance concerning EVC is distributed on different levels as follows:

- On macro-level: the ministry of education and the social partners
- On meso-level by the sector partners (employers and trade unions)
- On micro level of organisations by HR departments and internal EVC 'ambassadors'
- Any registered EVC-provider, as noted above. They are the main source of information, advice and guidance for people interested in VPL.

In addition, a regional structure has been set up with 35 Leer Werk Loketten⁸ across the country. Everyone – job-seeker, employee, employer – can visit such a centre and get free advice on learning and working opportunities. These centres are a pivotal link between training providers and the labour market. They (amongst others) facilitate the cooperation between EVC providers and employees and/or employers, in order to apply EVC as a career-guidance tool.

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

Information and guidance practitioners in the Netherlands are already reasonably informed about validation initiatives and practices. This is because these practitioners are working independently from the learning and working systems and their role is to link and refer their customers to these systems.

They focus on the main motivations for interest in EVC, which are diverse and orientated mainly towards employability and qualifications outcomes:

External motivators:

⁸ A 'leer werk loket' is a central place where all information can be found in the region on careers, training and combining learning and work.

- the employer wants me to work as a qualified worker
- I need the qualification for a pay rise or a job-opportunity
- I need to show my potential for a career step
- I want to get exemptions for a shortened course.

Internal motivators:

- Investing in oneself; learning as a fun-factor
- I feel awarded when offered an EVC-procedure.

In this respect these practitioners are well aware of the bottlenecks in raising awareness on the value of EVC:

- Power of the standards: lack of acceptance at schools/universities that people might have learned outside of the classroom
- The extra costs, since VPL is not embedded in education and HRM; only registered VPL-providers are allowed to offer VPL-procedures at real costs (although subsidies are found)
- The idea that a lot of hard work is required for obtaining a qualification or job-change. It is not perceived as added value for the organization as a whole.

The practitioners are best able to perform their role when emphasizing the benefits of EVC for the individual and offering role-models on:

- investing in yourself can be fun and enjoyable,
- opening up career-opportunities,
- empowering effect of self-valuation,
- formal growth in obtaining formal qualifications,
- target-setting in learning opens up more than just working potential; it is about life as well,
- validation incorporates learning outcomes of volunteering and/or citizenship.

4 Quality assurance and evaluation

4.1 Quality Assurance Framework

The National Quality Code for EVC (based on the 'European Common Principles for Recognition and Validation of Non-formal and Informal Competencies') was initiated in 2006 as an instrument for stimulating the use of EVC in VET and HE (PLW, 2009) by creating control and trust in the quality of EVC-providers. This quality code corresponded at its initiation to the definition of APL (see the introduction).

In early 2010 the Minister of Education took control of the execution of 'the Quality Code EVC'. This followed a critical evaluation by the Inspectorate of Education of the quality of the accredited EVC providers (PLW 2009, IvO 2010). In this evaluation the quality of all accredited EVC providers, both on the levels of VET as well as of HE was regarded as insufficient. In general the conclusions of the evaluation were:

- the Dutch Quality Code functions properly but there is a question of ownership. Specifically the decision about which organisations can inspect the providers of the *Ervaringscertificaat* needs to be regulated.
- the quality of the providers differs too much in the implementation of the assessments,
- the outcomes of the assessments (*'Ervaringscertificaten'*) are not easily transferable between the providers.

The State Secretary of Education, Culture and Science therefore took control of quality assurance of the EVC-process. The aim was to overcome bottlenecks in the process during a period of three years.

In 2012, the code was upgraded to a tripartite governed quality-instrument. Government, employers and trade unions declared by signing the *EVC-convenant* that APL – on top of the qualification-instrument – was also to be implemented as a labour market tool for career guidance (Vsl EVC, 2012), therefore upgrading the existing focus on APL to the broader focus of VPL. The new code resulted from a broad consultation process among all stakeholders and from agreement by all parties. The main arrangements are:

- The use of the code is voluntary, but the signing parties dedicate themselves to promoting the use of the Quality code for VPL.
- Everyone who commences a VPL-procedure must agree on the reasons for doing so. VPL is not a standard process but an individualised series of arrangements customised to the goal and use of VPL. Customisation is the norm.
- Every VPL-procedure ends with a standardised⁹ EVC report called *Ervaringscertificaat* (Certificate of Experience). This report states that the individual has documentation of the competencies he or she possesses.
- Accredited VPL providers are listed in a VPL database. This database contains information about all VPL procedures that are useful for potential VPL candidates.

The 2012-update of the quality code served the purposes of bringing together the main stakeholders (government, employers and trade unions) as covenant partners; with this shift, some initial partners in the 2006 Code such as the education boards of VET-schools (MBO) and universities of applied sciences (HBO) were given more freedom in promoting EVC.

Another purpose was to also link the initial code to certification at branch or sectoral levels.

4.2 Quality assurance systems/ procedures

As noted above, the government has taken the lead on the national Quality Code for EVC since 2006, and confirmed its role in doing so in the updated version of the covenant of 2012. In this code the criteria are mentioned for certified EVC-procedures; for the format of EVC reports, etc. The bottlenecks in the system that existed from the start, however, still need to be overcome, as the research into the performance of EVC providers showed. This research was done by the Inspection of Education and pointed out that EVC providers need to improve the quality of the process of obtaining the assessment. Especially the written report of the assessment needed to be improved (IvO, 2012; Kenniscentrum EVC, 2012).

Thanks to the successful introduction of the EVC Quality Code there is now a better overview of the quality procedures applied to vocational competence-standards in VET and HE. The standards for EVC procedures are connected with the requirements in VET and HE. The examination committee has its own responsibility for awarding against the outcomes of an EVC assessment. There are no official regulations in relation to using the outcomes of an independent EVC procedure for composing a learning path for an individual student to obtain a degree and/or diploma. The exception is the fact that institutions have to accept applicants for exemptions based on (evidence of) non-formally and formally acquired competences. There are no rules on limits concerning the amount of credits to be given based on an assessment. Thus, EVC procedures are developed on the basis of the competence standards of VET and HE (and in this way actually based on the expected learning outcomes in these standards), while implementing the national Quality Code for EVC. The institutions of formal education are autonomous in accepting validation/EVC reports as means for giving exemptions.

The recognised providers are included in the EVC Register, which clearly indicates to citizens and employers where they can receive a customised service. The foundation for quality assurance of EVC is still strong and the government and social partners want to keep on investing in this issue whilst broadening its scope.

⁹ Information on how this standardisation is achieved can be found on the website of the [Kenniscentrum EVC](#)

4.3 Evaluation framework

Apart from the monitoring and evaluation that is carried out under the Quality Code, concerning the quality of the accredited EVC-providers, there is no official framework for qualitative and quantitative evaluation of progress and practice of EVC in the Netherlands.

There is incidental research into the quantity, impact and quality-aspects of EVC (Profitwise, 2011; Ecorys, 2012). Research is also carried out into the success and failure factors of the VPL-market and the effects of EVC for the individual and the organisation (Dungen et al, 2012). The main outcomes of this research were:

- There are in principal no barriers to the provision of exemptions for examinations and/or tests.
- There are no barriers to the provision of exemptions for educational components.
- The quality of EVC providers and the Ervaringscertificaat deserves continued attention.
- The quality of the evaluating organisations must be secured.
- Professionalisation of members of examination boards is very important.
- There should be more opportunities for further development after the issuing of an Ervaringscertificaat.
- The interplay between EVC-providers and examination boards can be improved by better information.

5 Validation methods

5.1 Methods used and the validation process

An EVC procedure in the Netherlands comprises similar or the same steps (Duvekot, 2009; Kenniscentrum EVC, 2009):

- Information and advice for the candidate, the employer or other organisation, etc.
- Intake of the individual and tailoring individual arrangements to the individual's defined career goals. The candidate decides on the choice of qualification and whether to start the EVC procedure or not.
- Recognition of competences: portfolio (supported by the coach)
- Validation of competences/assessment (by the assessors)
- EVC report: Description of results and accreditation (by the assessor), compared with the individual career goals, together with advice on further personal development taking account of the individual's defined career goals.

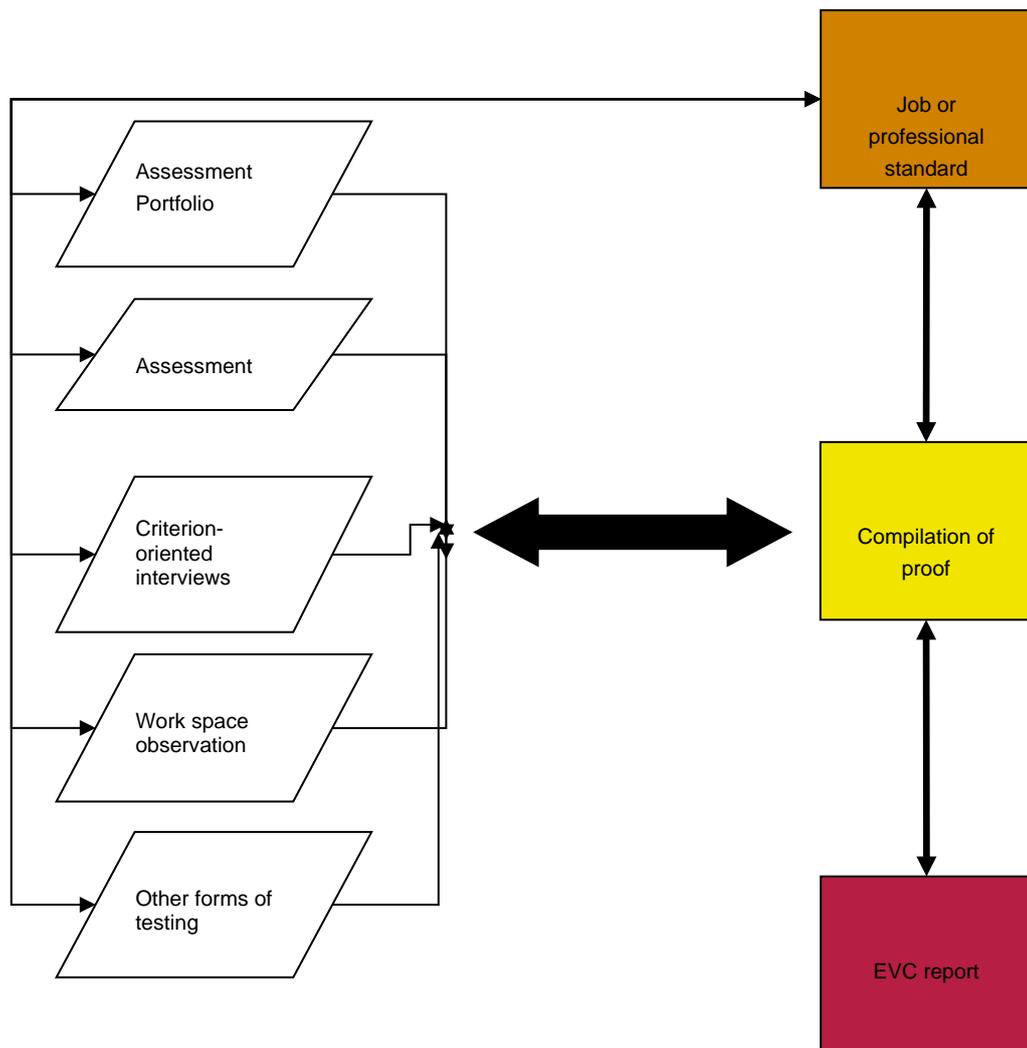
A candidate who wants to reflect his/her prior learning outcomes in relation to a qualification, has to fill in a portfolio (showcase) in which s/he can demonstrate how his/her learning experiences match with the competences in the qualification s/he has chosen. In an assessment s/he is judged and is given a report (Certificate of Experience) stating all the learning outcomes equivalent to the learning outcomes defined for the chosen qualification. With this Certificate of Experience (*ErvaringsCertificaat*) s/he can turn to an awarding body (the exam committee) of a school or university. In this way it becomes clear that the outcome of an EVC procedure is foremost an official advice for the candidate with which s/he can go to the awarding body. Only the awarding body is allowed to turn the advice into an official exemption. This awarding body can decide on exemptions in the learning programme. On the basis of these exemptions it is possible to achieve a (partial or full) qualification.

Usually, a mix of methods is used in EVC procedures because every situation and every individual is different. The model illustrated in the diagram below describes some examples of methods that can be used in EVC procedures:

- Portfolio,
- Criterion-oriented interviews,
- Portfolios,
- Observations,

- Other testing.

Figure 5.1 EVC Model



Source: ECI (2008)

6 Validation practitioners

6.1 Profile of validation practitioners

In general validation practitioners are recruited from different professional groups (such as teachers and trainers; public/private counsellors; personnel managers). They attend training programmes for the specific validation-responsibilities in question. Practitioners fulfil various functions:

- *Entry and career advisors*: the professionals who are responsible for the start of the EVC procedure (setting career goals)
- *assessors*: the professionals who assess individuals when they want to apply EVC for summative purposes;
- *portfolio-advisers*: the professionals who help people fill in their portfolio;
- *developers/advisors*: the professionals who develop EVC-procedures based on national standards; they also advise on this.
- *teacher-trainers*: the professionals who train the assessors and advisers.

For each of these functions, expertise in the EVC-field is expected. All professionals need to master a common set of competences at different levels. Developers/advisors and teachers/trainers are advised to participate in training so that they understand the integral process of EVC.

6.2 Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

The training of validation practitioners is ensured by official EVC-providers and by training-institutes within VET-schools (ROC's; MBO) and HE (HBO) and the Kenniscentrum EVC.

There is no formal, national standard. Practitioners must (according to the quality code for VPL):

- Understand key concepts and benefits of EVC.
- Review and analyse models of recognition and accreditation of prior learning.
- Analyse and develop the skills, knowledge and processes required to support EVC practice.
- Understand and apply the EVC process.
- Reflect on the impact of EVC on their own professional learning, practice and their educational setting.
- Understand the organisation, management and marketing of EVC.

The common set of competences (Duvekot & Geerts 2012) for EVC-processes consists of competences in relation to:

- *Reviewing*: the assessor/adviser needs to be able to adequately provide an assessment of the competences of the participant, using a number of common competency-based assessment forms such as the portfolio, the criterion based interview and practical simulations. He or she should be able to apply these assessment forms in an integral fashion within an EVC-procedure. The assessor/adviser is then able to perform an assessment on the basis of a standard (competency-profile), to assess the provided evidence of the candidate on the basis of the prevailing assessment-criteria and to assess answers of a participant using the standard.
- *Observing*: the assessor/adviser should be able to adequately observe the participant and to link an assessment-report to this observation, in relation to the standard that was used as a basis for the assessment.
- *Interviewing*: the assessor/adviser should be able, by using specific questions and interview techniques in an assessment-situation, to make the competences of the participant transparent and in the interview to compare these competences with the standard. The assessor/adviser then asks questions to investigate the value of personal experiences (competences, knowledge and skills).
- *Providing feedback*: the assessor/adviser should be able to provide feedback to the participant in a constructive and motivating way and to indicate the results of the

assessment, tailored to the level of the participant. The assessor/adviser can then explain and substantiate the decisions based on the assessment and indicate at which points the participant is competent. N.B. only if this is part of the procedure, however, it may also be done by the adviser.

- *Written communication*: the assessor/adviser should be able to write a clear, detailed and structured assessment report. The assessor/adviser then describes the competences of the participant that are valid for the relevant standard. Personal characteristics are only added when applicable.
- *(additional) Technical competence* (depending on a national learning culture, this competence can be added): the assessor/adviser needs to be technically competent and must have sufficient experience and qualifications in the appropriate discipline (professionally). The assessor needs to prove that he or she has sufficient technical skills and is willing to keep abreast of developments in the sector. The technical level of the assessor must be at least as high as that of the participant. The assessor/adviser needs to be familiar with the assessment (EVC) procedure and objectives, the assessment tools and the methodology. The assessor/adviser needs to be familiar with the sector or company standards (job descriptions, qualification profiles) and has knowledge of the labour market and vocational education programmes for the sake of the assessment.

6.3 Qualifications requirements

According to the Quality Code for EVC, individuals have to prove their professional standard to be EVC supervisors and assessors/advisers. Their competences must be documented. EVC providers can choose their own methods to prove their EVC-professionals. There is no official certificate for the various EVC-functions available, nor a standard or qualification for assessors in the Netherlands. There are however profiles with competences for assessors and professionals offering guidance, developed by the Kenniscentrum EVC.

Proposals to create a systematic standard for assessors have been made. These options were already formulated in the national policy paper from 2000 of the *Werkgroep EVC* (The glass is half full) but have not yet been taken up. The main option is to enhance an accreditation scheme for assessors and to evaluate their quality on the basis of a national standard, including a training course. Such a national standard (for internal company and external assessors) has not yet been formulated. In practice EVC providers have their own competence profiles for assessors. Due to the EVC Quality-code they are, however, all obliged to use the same format for filling in the reports after the assessment. Therefore a certain degree of comparability and quality-assurance is maintained.

A study conducted by the Kenniscentrum EVC (Dungen et al, 2012) made recommendations concerning the professionalization of EVC functions. The study looked at whether the proposals described above were appropriate or whether other accreditation forms are necessary and a more elaborated description of acquired competences is needed to ensure the sustainable quality of EVC.

An important recommendation referred to the need to distinguish between an EVC-assessor and a general assessor as EVC-assessors were required to hold more specific competences.

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