



How informal and non-formal learning is recognised in Europe

Netherlands – country report

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The Netherlands – country report

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This country report was composed as part of a larger study on validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe. The country reports of Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Norway, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom as well as the summary of the study both in English and German, and finally the complete publication (in German only) can be found at

www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/vnfil-in-europe.

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1 Introduction to the Dutch report

In the present society, more and more attention is given to the high value of soft' factors, the human capital besides 'hard' production factors such as machines and instruments. Of primary interest is human learning potential, capacity and flexibility, i.e. their deployment potential. It makes no difference whether one is working, learning or seeking employment. The focus is on the degree in which you can be deployed and/or remain so in and around the labour market and in other contributions that can be made to the society, such as voluntary work and private life.

People are always learning everywhere, and above all, not always in a conscious or self-chosen learning situation. The degree in which individuals and the knowledge society consciously build on this is still strongly underexposed and underutilised at the present time.

The identification, recognition and accreditation of non-formally and informally acquired competences (EVC) in the Netherlands is intended to recognise and to value what people have learned so far, formally, non-formally and informally. EVC is not designed to highlight the lack of knowledge and skills but to take stock of existing knowledge and skills: in other words, rather than being half empty, EVC takes the view that the glass is half full!

In this report the implementation, policy and practices of EVC in the Netherlands is presented, with a special focus on the position of persons with low levels of formal qualification in the systematics of EVC.

2 Initial situation

A national system for validation of non-formal and informal learning in the Netherlands started in 1998. Under the umbrella-term "EVC" – which stands for "Erkenning van Verworven Competenties". In English "EVC", depending on the specific usage of the method, can be translated as "Recognition of ...", "Accreditation of ..." or "Validation of Prior Learning" as the Dutch EVC-system evolved into a threefold approach:

- Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) – 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 qualification standard ("Ervaringscertificaat"), and
- Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) – the umbrella-term that includes all forms of validation: the two formal ones already mentioned, but also the informal use of EVC 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 term "EVC" is used in this report, it can mean a formalised form of EVC or a more open, informal use of EVC as an instrument for a creating lifelong learning perspectives. In general the abbreviation "VPL" is used.

2.1 Formal, non-formal and informal learning

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 a dominance over the learning taking place in sectors or organisations (Lenssen 2011). In this culture harmonising the interests of authorities, employers and trade unions is constantly negotiated, including the role of education that is divided into a responsibility for initial education (the government) and post-initial education ('the market').

Table 1: Formal, Non-formal and Informal Learning in the Netherlands and the EU (sources: SER 2012, Cedefop 2009)

	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

The situation and the prospects for persons with low levels of formal qualification in the Netherlands is on the one hand safeguarded by their implicit right to obtain at any time in their life a start-qualification (differentiated per sector between national qualification-level 2 or level 3) and on the other hand threatened by the system-orientation of vocational education in which there is little customer-orientation possible, due to financial restraints (only focus on the accountability of education) and the complexity of intake and admission-procedures.

2.2 Ervaringsprofiel and Ervaringscertificaat

The “Ervaringsprofiel” and “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), VET Colleges (ROC) and universities (mainly HE qualifications awarded by universities of applied sciences).

Candidates for the “Ervaringsprofiel” or the “Ervaringscertificaat” can use these certificates:

- The “Ervaringsprofiel” is a procedure for setting up a personal portfolio. It is a formative approach aimed at recognition of all the competences of a candidate. It is used for advising a citizen on the possible opportunities for validation or personal development steps. It also points out what to do when a specific qualification or diploma is at stake. This form can best be called Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). It is an independent document with a legal status; the “Ervaringsprofiel” is a registered certificate and as such acknowledged by the education sector and the social partners.
- The “Ervaringscertificaat” 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 refers to a specific national qualification standard and the accreditation consists of exemptions that can be claimed at a qualifying institute or school. This form can be called Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL). The outcome – the “Ervaringscertificaat” – is not the award itself but a formal certificate with a report containing the described competences that can be awarded by the exam committee of the chosen standard. Therefore, in the Netherlands there is a difference between accrediting prior learning outcomes and awarding the accredited learning outcomes in terms of exemptions for a qualification or for a full qualification.

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 EVC. Government, schools/colleges/universities and social partners focused on creating favourable 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 managed by the “ 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, transparency and to guarantee the summative effects by means of certification or qualification.
- Since 2013, a new change of strategy for validation is taking place in relation with the government’s drive to move 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 EVC as a formalised instrument for Validation of Learning Outcomes linked to not only national qualifications but also to sector standards (sector level training, or in Dutch post-initial or non-formal learning). This means an enlargement of the scope of the two formal terms “Ervaringsprofiel” and “Ervaringscertificaat”. The new policy was presented in 2014 (MOCW, 2014) and broadened the perspectives of validation for Dutch citizens. The outcome of this reorientation, is closely linked to making

EVC a successful tool in both learning and working processes and is aiming at sharing ownership of the method and its instruments, such as the portfolio, the assessment and validation. The next step will be – amongst others - from 2016 the experimentation in pilots in higher education (HE) to utilize EVC for access to and tailor-made learning in HE for adult learners.

3 Vocational training and informal learning in the Netherlands: characteristics and concepts

Vocational training in the Netherlands is closely linked to general secondary education. On average, children are 12 years of age when they enter general secondary education. Secondary education encompasses schools providing pre-university education (VWO), general secondary education (HAVO), pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO) and practical training (pro). VMBO comprises four learning pathways:

- The basic vocational programme (BL),
- The middle-management vocational programme (KL),
- The combined theoretical and vocational programme (GL),
- The theoretical programme (TL).

After VMBO, at an average age of 18, students may transfer to vocational education (MBO). Those who have completed the theoretical programme can also choose to transfer to HAVO. HAVO is intended as preparation for higher professional education (HBO). VWO is intended to prepare students for research-oriented education (WO). In practice, however, VWO graduates also transfer to HBO. The school types differ in terms of the duration of their programmes: VMBO takes four years, HAVO five years and VWO six years.

In 1998 VBO and MAVO were combined into VMBO. VMBO students can receive additional support through learning support programmes (LWOO). In addition, practical training programmes (pro) were initiated. With the conversion of practical training programmes and the learning support departments, special secondary education has been incorporated into mainstream secondary education. On 28 May 1998, an Act was implemented which required all SVO/LOM (for children with learning and behavioural difficulties) and SVO/MLK (for children with moderate learning difficulties) schools either to merge with a mainstream secondary school, or to convert to a practical training institution (pro) or a special education centre (OPDC).

3.1 Characteristics of Dutch vocational training

With the implementation of the WEB, the act on Vocational Education and Training, in 1996 the two existing learning pathways in VET (work-based or school-based) were put in the same qualification framework. The school-based option with full-time education is called the BOL system and the work-based pathway, offering a combination of work and study, is called BBL. Both learning pathways offer programs on four different levels, ranging from the entry level to the middle-management level with qualification profiles that are drawn up by branch commissions representing the employers and the world of education and training on equal terms. The number of students in the work-based learning pathway versus the school-based learning pathway slightly fluctuates according to the economic situation.

The duration of the courses varies from six months to four years, depending on the level and other requirements of the course. There are four general qualification levels – grounded in the Dutch Qualification Framework (NLQF) - to obtain:

- Level 1 - entry level
- Level 2 - basic vocational training
- Level 3 - full professional training
- Level 4 - middle management and specialist training

In the upcoming years the government wants to stimulate people to get into higher education (higher professional or vocational education - HBO or research-oriented education - WO). More than 50 percent should follow higher education in 5 till 10 years, as was indicated by *the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy* (an independent, scientific advisory body for the Dutch government – WRR) (WRR 2013).

Adult education is a formal part of the vocational education system. It is accessible for adults from the age of 18 onwards and offers various programmes for their development. Adult education offers, for example, introductory courses for immigrants into the Netherlands, language and literacy courses at various levels and second-chance secondary education. It plays a major role in integration issues and contributes to social cohesion.

Higher vocational education is offered at NLQF-levels 5 (associate degree), 6 (bachelor) and 7 (master). Higher education in the Netherlands has a binary structure. It is composed of higher professional or vocational education (HBO or “hogescholen”) and research-oriented education (WO). These types of education are provided by “hogescholen” (HBO) – in English ‘universities for applied sciences’- and universities (WO) respectively.

Since 1993, the universities of applied sciences or “hogescholen” and research universities have been governed by the same legislation: the Higher Education and Research Act (WHW). This Act permits the institutions a large measure of freedom in the way they organize their teaching and other matters to meet changing demands.

4 Persons with low levels of formal qualification: concept, employment situation, further education behaviour

4.1 Educational and economic policy background

The Netherlands face numerous challenges in the transition from the industrial economy to the knowledge society. The main challenges (WRR 2013) are:

- Ageing of the workforce. Within 10 years traditional recruitment won't be able to fill in the gap of the pensioned people. This has consequences involving organisations and the costs of, for example, pensions, health care and care for the elderly.
- The need for upskilling the workforce. There is a shortage expected of higher (vocational) educated people. Quantitatively the number of higher educated workers will have to rise to about 30 percent of the total labour population to fill in this need (WRR 2013, Genabeek et al 2007). Those levels for upper secondary VET-levels staying the same: 40 percent and for low- or unskilled labour dropping from 39 percent to 29 percent (also Genabeek et al. 2007).
- The need for attracting migrants. It is estimated that the Netherlands faces a structural shortage of labour power in 2050 of almost 300.000 full-time equivalents. Only by starting now with attracting migrants (esp. from level 3 upwards) this problem can be solved (also Berkhout et al. 2007).

These labour market challenges have their effects on VET and Higher Education:

- VET has to be able to accommodate adult learners in bigger numbers.
- VET has to be able to offer more customer-friendly and flexible learning.
- Higher Education has the same challenge to offer more customer-friendly and flexible learning.
- Personalising learning is a topic: give the learners themselves more power to self-regulate their need for learning.

The development of competence-based education in Dutch VET has raised an innovative challenge for both teachers and policy-makers at all levels in the system. However, it should be recognised that the concepts of competence and competence-based education have been in use for a long time in education and human performance technology. Competence-based education is seen as an alternative for working with qualifications and qualification structures, as has been the case in Dutch VET during the last 20-25 years. In fact, both approaches are based on the same assumptions: qualifications and competencies are both derived from job analysis and forecasting techniques and are both used as input for curriculum development and for assessment of learning outputs.

This educational and economical background makes clear that a lot of pressure also comes down to the group of persons with low levels of formal qualification in society for whom the call to participate in answering the society's needs is rising and growing. Participation in this context explicitly entails pressure to take up the own responsibility since the traditional backing from the social system is being broken down by the government and shafted to the responsibility of local authorities for jobless persons with low levels of formal qualification and to the social partners for those of them who are employed.

4.2 Persons with low levels of formal qualification: concept and typology

Persons with low levels of formal qualification in the Netherlands are defined as the people that didn't reached out to a higher qualification level than primary education and/or lower secondary education. In general this means that a person without a 'starting qualification (under NLQF-levels 2 or 3)' is considered to be unskilled or low-skilled. The term low-skilled therefore only has meaning in educational terms and doesn't say anything about a social and/or economic successful or unsuccessful life!

The Dutch Education Council (an independent governmental advisory body that advises the Minister, Parliament and local authorities on education issues) advised the government in 2012 (Onderwijsraad 2012) on the status of persons with low levels of formal qualification in the Netherlands. The Council defines 'persons with low levels of formal qualification' generally as persons without a starting qualification at NLQF-level 2.

The Council wrote that as a result of developments in the labour market and in society increasing demands are asked of adults. As a result, the position of persons with low levels of formal qualification on the labour market – which already is rather fragile - continues to stay under great pressure. In order to remain employable on the labour market and to be sufficiently self-reliant in society post-initial learning for this group is highly important.

The Council believes that good initial education is the main way to safeguard sustainable employability of all citizens. However, practice shows that a proportion of young people leaves school without a starting qualification (without MBO diploma at level 2). For this group of persons with low levels of formal qualification, the government has a special responsibility. To strengthen their position towards and on the labour market and in society the Council makes four recommendations to stimulate their learning opportunities. It is expected that the proposed measures support the position of older, working or non-working persons with low levels of formal qualification as well since an important function of post-initial learning is focused on the lifelong learning strategy that aims at helping any Dutch citizen to gain a formal starting qualification.

- *Link learning incentives to the specific needs of persons with low levels of formal qualification:* The Council advises the social partners (trade unions and employers) and the government to encourage post-initial learning by aiming at "reachable" learning opportunities by keeping "the thresholds low for re-starting learning". The stakeholders involved can do this best by utilizing small-scale partnerships in learning. The daily working and living environment of the potential learners must be paramount. Also deploying more social contacts can help people in their careers. Furthermore, post-initial learning should be the standard procedure in the career-guidance of companies, both for employees as well as for "flexworkers".
- *Secure the quality of "ervaringscertificaten":* Experience certificates ("ervaringscertificaten") are helpful in recognizing informal learning and encouraging post-initial learning but the quality of EVC differs too much among the output of EVC-providers. The Council recommends to sharpen the overseeing of the accreditation process of the EVC-providers. To this end, the Ministry of Education should monitor the quality of the licensing authorities and allocate this function to a government agency. The Council also proposes that the quality of EVC-providers becomes more visible by making their findings or reviews of portfolios public. By checking more often, a license of an EVC-provider might be issued for a longer period than the present 3 years. Furthermore, the

Council proposes next to the accreditation of single qualification programmes also to accredit at the general level of the institution that provides “*ervaringscertificaten*”.

- *Set strict requirements on providers of qualification programmes:* A significant portion of the persons with low levels of formal qualification is low literate and therefore more vulnerable. Therefore, the Council recommends to set clear quality measures for providers of qualification programmes for adults. Quality of learning should be more accountable in adult education and better adapted to the specific learning needs of the different participants (tailor-made learning).
- *Experiment with measures and research their operation and effectiveness:* Participation in post-initial learning is measured too general to assess the success for specific groups, like the lower-skilled persons. In particular, for the heterogeneous group of persons with low levels of formal qualification the Council recommends to experiment at a small scale with initiatives that have proved to be promising for them, e.g. in getting access to and getting tailor-made learning. These measures should be monitored systematically on their operational status and their effectiveness before implemented more generally.

4.3 Areas of employment of persons with low levels of formal qualification

Research by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research provides data on the labour market position of persons with low levels of formal qualification at the start of the 2010s (Josten 2010). In general terms the general picture has not yet changed so much due to the fact that the labour market is only very gradually getting better for all workers and job-seekers (Waasdorp and Van Krimpen 2014).

The number of low-skilled jobs has remained constant between 1987 and 2008. In total there were about 2.2 million lower-skilled jobs in 2008. The proportion of the total number of these jobs has fallen from 40 percent in 1987 to 30 percent in 2008. The labour market position of low-educated women has improved and that of low-educated men deteriorated in some areas.

A significant portion of all workers and job seekers in the Netherlands have low levels of formal qualifications: 24 percent. They have at most a pre-vocational secondary diploma or equivalent. Policymakers feared for some time that the labour market position of this group would worsen. They foresaw a contraction in the number of low-skilled jobs, as a result of continued application of information technology in the workplace and the relocation of work to low-wage countries. The number of low-skilled jobs, however, until now remained almost unchanged. Only the number of jobs at pre-vocational secondary level decreased between 1991 and 1996, but this was offset by an increase in the number of jobs at the elementary school level. The nature of the low-skilled work changed though. The typical low-skilled male occupations in industry and agriculture shrank in size. This was offset by strong growth in the service sector (e.g. salesperson, catering assistant) and a slightly slower growth of the transport work (e.g. truck) on low-skilled level. The low-skilled service work is mainly done by women, low-skilled transport work by men.

The labour market position of persons with low levels of formal qualification has only worsened in recent decades where it concerns their professional level: now they more often than before perform in jobs that require at most primary school. In many respects, however, there was an improvement. For instance during the recession of 2004-2005 they were less likely to be unemployed than during the recession of 1994-1995. Five years ago the unemployment rate was 6 percent for ‘vmbo’ pupils and 10 percent for people with only primary school. In the middle of the 1990s these figures were respectively 6 percent and 13 percent.

Furthermore, their participation in the labour market increased: in 1992 65 percent of VMBO pupils and 46 percent of those with primary school worked or were actively looking for work, whilst in 2008 this had risen to 71 percent and 53 percent respectively. The hourly wage of workers with low levels of formal qualification increased by 0.4 percent per year (VMBO pupils) and 1.0 percent (people with primary school) between 1996 and 2002 (adjusted for inflation) (Waasdorp and Van Krimpen 2014). The job quality has not changed much: the percentage of workers with low levels of formal qualification with a flexible or short-term contracts (<1 year) remained stable compared to previous, comparable periods in the economic cycle.

The backlog of workers with low levels of formal qualification in secondary education remained virtually unchanged over the past decades. The gap with the highly educated increased. Especially for low-educated women employment increased and unemployment lowered. Also the percentage with flexible or short-term contracts. Among males just a few aggravations occurred. Firstly, they have more often than they used to a flexible or short-term contract. Secondly, the younger age groups among them in recent years are less likely to participate in the labour market than before.

In terms of prospects for the coming years the ones with higher education have a positive perspective. The outlook is more negative for in particular functions on lower levels (VMBO and MBO levels), with a negative score especially for nursing and care at lower levels. Maintenance, installation and repair sectors score rather well at sector level. This goes also for ICT/IT and telecommunications. These are sectors where a lot of people with technical or IT related functions are employed. Moderate scoring sectors are security, law enforcement and social services (Waasdorp and Van Krimpen 2014; Vrooman, Gijsberts and Boelhouwer 2014).

4.4 Further training behaviour of persons with low levels of formal qualification

There is not much research done into the further training behaviour of lower-skilled persons in the Netherlands. Some notions:

- A study on the employability of workers with low levels of formal qualification in the knowledge economy in the early 2000s (Grip and Zwick, n.d..) showed that training participation of this group in the European Union is far below training participation of the workers with medium or high qualifications. While more than 15 percent of the prime-age highly qualified workers participate in training, only 2.7 percent of the workers with low levels of formal qualification participate. The study showed, furthermore, that there are substantial differences in the training participation of this group between the EU Member States. In particular in the Netherlands, it is relatively high. The same study showed that older employees receive less training than younger employees. The OECD compared training participation of relatively young workers aged 25-29 years with those aged 50-54 years. There are however substantial differences in the training participation of older workers with low levels of formal qualification between various EU countries with relatively high participation rates in the Netherlands and the UK and a very low rates r in Italy, Germany, France, and Spain.
- In 2010 more than 75 percent of all companies facilitated one or more forms of company-steered training for about 77 percent of their staff. Of these forms, courses are the most important instrument in 70percent of all companies. About 50 percent of these courses was by participating in conferences, seminars or workshops. Almost 28 percent was invested by the staff in self-steered learning. Quality-circles or organised

group-debates accounted for 17 percent of the training taking place and 13 percent took the form of job-rotation, exchange or detachment (CBS 2012).

- In 2011 almost 1.5 million people between 15-65 years old participated in adult education. This is a participation level of 15.3 percent of this age-group. More than 12 percent of these participants attending adult education had a qualification level 1 and about 16 percent a qualification level 2-3 (CBS 2012).

5 Core elements of the validation non-formal and informal learning: status quo

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 the change of focus to the quality-assurance of EVC 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. For this reason the Interdepartmental Project Unit for Learning and Working (PLW) was set up. 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. In 2014 a broadening of the perspectives to which EVC can lead to is expected from only a perspective on qualifications to a multi-targeted perspective, combining both qualifications as well as career paths.

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 the education supply and the demand on the labour market side. The challenge was to connect these two worlds via the learner, on the one hand by converting learning experiences into certificates or diplomas, and on the other by allowing for the development of competences in a career context (Werkgroep EVC, 2000). To support implementation, the government established the Kenniscentrum EVC (Knowledge Centre on Accreditation of Prior Learning) in 2001.

5.1 Legal basis

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

- The Law on Adult and Vocational Education (WEB 1996) is the law in which the basis was laid for what later in 1998 was formally developed as EVC-policy in the Netherlands. This law prescribed the equality of formal, non-formal and informal learning outcomes.
- In Higher Education, the law “Wet of het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek” (WHW - law on higher education and scientific research) regulates also 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 is a number of institutions that state that an EVC procedure can be used to replace this test.

The relevance for the target group of unskilled and low-skilled is strong, especially for the perspectives that are opened up through the Law on Adult and Vocational Education where the target group has the right to be educated at starting level, with or without the assistance of EVC.

5.2 Process, procedures and instruments

In the Netherlands EVC is in general a process in five phases. The EVC-procedure linked to this process is the translation of this process to the specific objective of an EVC-candidate.

5.2.1 The process

The process of EVC in general consists of five phases: commitment and awareness of the value of one's competences, recognition of personal competences, valuation and assessment of these competences, (advice on the) development of one's competences and finally structurally embedding this competence-based development process into a personal or organisation steered and owned policy (Duvekot et al 2005a). Together these five phases constitute the EVC-process:

Phase 1: Commitment and awareness

This phase consists of two steps: raising awareness and setting the targets for EVC within a specific context. This phase is the real critical success factor for EVC since if the organisation and the individual(s) don't sense the necessity to think or rethink their mission and connect this need to strengthening human resource management, the process of EVC is not very likely to start up successfully.

Phase 2: Recognition

This phase is made up of a preparatory and a retrospective step. The preparation aims at articulating the actual need for competences in the organisation in the different function-profiles. In the retrospective step, the involved individuals fill in their portfolios and acquire the necessary proof of their learning in the (recent) past.

Phase 3: the validation or assessment of competences

This phase needs different steps:

- Setting the standard of the specific EVC-process. It can in principal be any standard that meets the needs of the individual and/or the organisation, e.g. a national or sector qualification-standard or an internal standard. Together with the standard a choice can be made of the way the assessment will take place;
- The recognition itself, being the assessment of the portfolio and recognizing it with correspondence to the given standard and targets of the organisation;
- The recognition of the learning evidence within the given standard.

Phase 4: the development plan

This phase has two steps. First, a match should be made between the individual's development plan and the goals of the organisation. This match could be made by simply stating that any kind of individual learning is also for the benefit of the organisation. Mostly, however, the match will be agreed upon by making the personal development plan a formal part of the broader organisation plan.

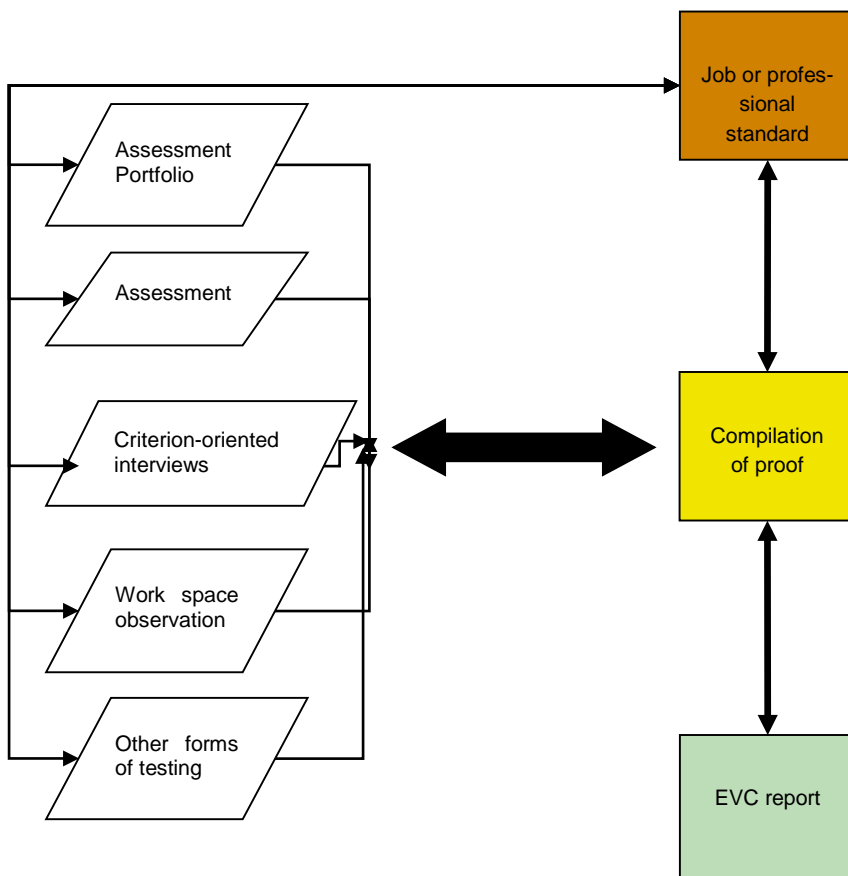
Secondly, the actual learning or development of the individual will be started up. In this step, the individual learns/develops him or herself on a 'made-to-measure basis', which means learning/developing irrespective and independent of form, time, place and environment.

Phase 5: structural implementation of EVC

The last phase of the EVC-process focuses at the structural implementation of EVC in a personal strategy for updating the portfolio or in the human resource management (HRM) of an organisation. The relevance for the target group of unskilled and low-skilled is that EVC in the Dutch set-up in general helps the target group to raise their awareness and capitalize on their informal and non-formal learning. This leads to their empowerment and potentially also to a formal certificate with which they can strengthen their changes on the labour market. In practice this situation is obstructed by the complexity of the procedure in which the citizen involved needs to be able to formulate his/her learning outcomes in an articulated way. Guidance is offered but this is subject to the willingness of the involved school.

Data on the use of EVC for the target group are not available. In 2013 a total number of 30.514 EVC-procedures were accounted for (Kippersluis 2014). Of this number 17 percent was executed in VET for certification on VET-levels 1-4. The majority (80 percent) was executed on sector-level for purposes of function-oriented valuation.

Figure: the Dutch 'EVC' process (source: ECI 2008)



5.2.2 Binding procedures

In the Netherlands the binding procedures concerning the validation of informal and non-formal learning outcomes can, first of all, incorporate also the prior formal learning outcomes of a person, and, secondly, lead to recognition in NLQF-based qualifications up to level 7. The linkage with level 8 is only in possible on the basis of admission of selected persons to honorary doctorates at academic universities. Binding procedures are only linked to qualifications and take different forms:

- Binding procedures for access to a specific qualification-programme,
- Binding procedures for exemptions in specific qualification-programmes.

Access to learning opportunities is potentially possible for all citizens in the Netherlands, especially for adult education. Adult education is geared at people over 18 whose goal it is to qualify for work and prepare for further training. Adults who are unemployed or wish to re-enter the labour market are primarily targeted. In general, adult education can be divided into three parts:

- The education which comes under the 1996 Adult and Vocational Education Act (“Wet educatie en beroepsonderwijs” – WEB) and is provided at the ROCs: basic adult education and general secondary education for adults. Participants in general secondary education for adults must have completed compulsory education to be admitted. Additional requirements may possibly be imposed, depending on the type of education.
- The training of unemployed adults, financed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, does not have any national structure for recognition and examination. The focus is on recognition by the regional business community. The main purpose of the specific training, which comes under the Manpower Services Act (“Wet op de arbeidsvoorziening”) from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, is to strengthen the position of disadvantaged groups on the labour market.
- Part-time vocational education and inservice training schemes. Internal training in enterprises is not organised in any consistent way. The learning routes are highly heterogeneous and recognised by enterprises (not nationally). Quite a lot of private training providers are active in the market of continuing (vocational) training, of which 200 are formally recognised training institutes. They have the right to provide training programmes that fit the requirements of the national qualification structure and participants therefore can obtain a nationally recognised diploma. The most significant forms of part-time vocational education subsidised by the government are part-time MBO and part-time HBO. The participants generally attend these alongside their work.

To participate in an EVC-procedure, an employee normally has to have 3 to 5 years of experience in the sector he or she is working on. The general goal is to validate the competences that employees have learned by working. In some collective labour agreements (e.g. metal industry), employees have been given the right to participate in EVC in order to obtain an “Ervaringscertificaat” that will help them in getting access to a qualification programme or to a job-opportunity. This kind of EVC is supported by the own sector training institutes with the assistance of an external EVC-provider. The costs are mainly covered by sector training funds and tax-facilities

In most cases, an intake meeting/interview with the employee is held first. On the basis of this intake, examiners decide whether the individual is able to participate in an exam or assessment procedure directly. In case not, the individual is offered educational training for improving his or her competences. Afterwards he or she is asked to participate in an exam-procedure for certification of qualifications. In some cases the individual makes a portfolio in which experience is presented by a sum of certificates, notes on projects that have been worked on.

In almost all EVC-procedures, the assessment is executed by assessors that need to be independent from the organisation that asks for EVC. The method used is a combination of a portfolio-assessment, including a criterion-based interview, and - if necessary – a performance-assessment.

Most companies try to follow the formal regulations, described in the Law on education and vocational training (WEB). It is valued as important, while employees receive a certificate or diploma with national value. Starting up EVC within companies is mostly a matter of summative assessment. Formative valuation however is rapidly emerging. Although several companies have set up EVC-procedures for employees in the last couple of years, a systematic and comprehensive overview on a national level is not available.

For job-seekers the EVC-opportunity is also available. They need to ask permission at the UWV (their local job-agency) to start up such a procedure for a specific goal: obtaining a qualification with which they can raise their chances for reaching out to paid work.

The position of persons with low levels of formal qualification is in this context of binding procedures safeguarded, as it is also for higher-skilled persons in the Dutch society. Dutch society is strongly egalitarian and therefore all binding procedures are equally open for use to every Dutch citizens. The difference is the access to information on binding procedures. Especially the UWV (job-agencies) informs especially the lower-skilled groups actively on their potential opportunities in the fields of binding procedures to which they as Dutch citizens – or as citizens with an accepted refugee-status – have the right of access to.

5.2.3 Non-binding procedures

Non-binding procedures mainly focus on raising awareness and guiding persons to the articulation of a specific wish in terms of learning and/or working. Especially the “Ervaringsprofiel” is used for generating motivation for looking into one’s development so far and answering the question of what’s the next step going to be in this development. This is for instance the core of a structured training for answering these two questions with the CH-Q System of Managing Competencies. This system is dedicated to strengthening links between the personal and professional development of young people and adults and their socio-economic integration. The overall objective is to enable them to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills of how to handle a sustainable career and life planning. This implies adequate training and guidance. The training concept is based on an extensive set of methods addressing all issues in career management. The solution oriented learning processes are centred on the identification, assessment and recognition of skills and competencies and they are backed up by accompanying instruments for young people and adults (print and electronic version). The latter include folders of competencies (Portfolios), of qualifications (formal, informal evidences), of applications as well as special instruments to prepare validation and accreditation procedures. (Schoor 2011; www.ch-q.nl)

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 culminate in setting specific targets for the investment in individuals and the support the organisation can give to this human resource development.

5.3 Financial structures

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

5.3.1 Funding for 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 2005b). 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)

5.3.2 Funding for job-seekers

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 their redundant employees 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.

5.3.3 EVC in the learning context

EVC has been embedded in the programming of VET-schools (ROCs) and universities of applied sciences. Also the Open University offers EVC in some of its programmes. 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.

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 the previous section, 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'. With this impact on lowering the costs of attending education or training also another important financial indicator is established, namely the potential benefit for an organization in lowering their costs for having to pay for the absence of leave of their learners.

The relevance for the target group of unskilled and low-skilled people in financial terms is that he/she needs to have a paying employer or job-agency for covering the costs for EVC. This is likely to be possible since these costs are tax-deductible and considered to be an investment in someone's employability.

5.4 Institutionalisation

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.

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 assessments ("Ervaringscertificaten") are not easily transferable between the providers.

The State Secretary of Education, Culture and Science therefore took control of the EVC-process. It is intended that during a period of three years the bottlenecks in the process should be overcome.

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 now – on top of the qualification-instrument – also was to be grounded as a labour market tool for career guidance (VSI EVC 2012).

The new code resulted from a broad consultation process among all stakeholders and agreement by all parties on the following main arrangements:

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

The 2012-update of the quality code served the purposes of – first of all - 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 link the initial code also to certification on branch- or sector-levels.

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 (IvO 2012). The same research also pointed out that EVC providers need to improve the quality of the process of obtaining the assessment.

Thanks to the 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 committees in VET-schools and universities have the authority for granting access to qualification-programmes and/or awarding credits or exemptions when examining the outcomes of an EVC assessment. There are no limits concerning the amount of credits to be given based on an EVC assessment; it could theoretically even result in the granting of a full qualification.

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

5.5 Support structures

Raising awareness of the necessity and opportunities of 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.

Most of all, an individual has to be self-aware of his/her own competences, of the value he/she is giving him/herself to these competences and the value it has for others in certain contexts at certain moments. Being able to keep up your competences in a 'made-to-measure way' is vital for this understanding.

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 also on different levels by:

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

In addition, a regional structure has been set up with 35 Leer Werk Loketten (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) across the country. Everyone – job-seeker, employee, and employer – can visit such a centre and get a free advice on learning and working opportunities. These centres are a linking-pin 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.

6 Education policy positions on the validation of informally and non-formally acquired competences

It is likely and expected that EVC is more and more going to focus on making it possible for a person to make an inventory of his/her competences, allowing those competences to receive a value and to be recognized; it is not a direct requirement that development steps are taken instantly, as this is up to the individual to decide. Recognizing and placing value on competences is also known as the passive or summative EVC approach. When EVC also stimulates further learning this is called activating or formative EVC. These are the main streams within EVC. A third form is focused on the person him- or herself and can be considered as a reflective form of EVC in which the individual is undergoing a process of self-recognition (Duvekot 2014).

The methodology for EVC in the Netherlands can all be captured in three main modes:

Reflective EVC, takes the whole learning biography of an individual as the focus for building up a portfolio and action plan. Only after this, the individual makes a choice on taking action: which standard to link to, which stakeholders to address, which learning goal, etc. It refers to the notion of autonomy of the individual.

Summative EVC: building up a portfolio against a pre-set standard, with a one-dimensional goal; looking for access and exemptions.

Formative EVC: meeting up with a portfolio to a standard for deciding on what/where/how to learn further, or formulating a career-step.

The difference between these approaches is that in a summative and formative EVC process the focus is on recognizing someone's development against a pre-set standard. Evidence for such recognition is collected in the form of 'a snapshot of someone's present status quo' through his/her diplomas, certificates, professional products, etc. The outcome of the EVC-process is official recognition for learning accomplishments within a qualification or certificate. The award is captured in exemptions or (sometimes) in full qualifications/certificates.

The reflective process is quite different from the other forms. It is geared at enabling individuals to manage their own careers, articulate their own development needs and build up their own competences. Education and vocational training should respond to this, becoming more flexible and demand-driven. Formal systems such as qualification structures and vocational education will then have less of a prescriptive function in terms of personal development, and serve more as a reference framework and repertoire within which there is individual choice. These formal systems retain a function as pegs for defining the direction and level of personal development and the relevant external communication with employers, mediators, referrers, schools, etc.

7 Summary and prospects

In general EVC means that all stakeholders acquire a clear picture of their competence demands and requirements, work on the formulation of their demand, and invest in their “human capital”. For the education/training partners in society, EVC means acting above all as a “listening” partner, initiating and offering customized learning/training. The citizen – and especially the lower-skilled citizens - has to (be) prepare(d) for the exploration, identification and development of his/her personal competences so that he/she can work proactively on enhanced employability and career opportunities. EVC and custom work are outstanding tools with which the citizen can attain this enhancement if guided by transparent competence-based standards in the sector and supported by well-trained professionals (guides, assessors) and supportive actions from the education and training-sectors.

7.1 Conclusions

In order to be able to recognise the developments regarding EVC within a country the following conclusions can be drawn:

EVC has everything to do with the potential of (lifelong) learning for learners and organisations in terms of employability and empowerment. A strong focus on the self-managing role of the ‘learner’ him- or herself is a crucial part in exploiting this potential to the fullest:

- The learner can be in charge of putting together and maintaining the portfolio. The portfolio is the basis for the formation of a lifelong learning strategy. Guidance from the organisation is essential;
- The sector/organisation is responsible for formulating the organisation’s competence needs in transparent competence-standards (in terms of explicit learning outcomes) and to facilitate investment in its *learning* employees;
- The education/training partners must be able to respond to the various learning needs of the learning individual, in other words be able to offer learning/training programmes that can be implemented custom-made with respect to learning objectives/forms/environments (blended learning).

Commitment is essential for the idea that the learner plays a key role in establishing, being able (or supported in being able) to co-design and -implement any learning strategy up to a certain level (a certain level has a bandwidth from autonomous and self-helped till dependent and fully coached/guided). This investment in human capital calls for co-designing responsibilities for the learner him/herself. At all times the primary process here is the process of moving towards the desired learning goals, both in determining an individual’s starting situation as well as during an individual’s development course, leading to the expected (new) learning outcome.

The portfolio is a powerful way to give structure and content to this learner's responsibility of co-design. Guidance from within the sector and companies could be a welcome push in this direction by offering:

- Training in self-management of competences, for formation of the portfolio.
- Help in putting together a portfolio in the work situation. An expert on the subject, easily approachable, who can offer help in designing a portfolio, is of great value in actually realising portfolio formation.
- Self-assessment tools, for instance, to help determine the competence and ambition level of the learner. This could be of great use in determining goals and direction in the learner's learning objectives, of course with respect to the sector needs.

In the light of the different goals that can prevail in sector-based learning strategies, further research is needed into the motives for and the design of learning strategies. The four models (educational, upgrade, HRD and lifelong learning) can then be pushed forward in the dialogues between learner, sector/organisation and education/training partners, in which the three main actors can deal effectively with their respective responsibilities.

EVC as a bridge between the portfolio of the learner and the competence-based standards of the organisation, supported by education/training partners, only becomes relevant when on 'the one side of the bridge' concrete learning needs have been formulated, which than 'on the other side of the bridge' can be answered efficiently by education/training partners. The basis for all learning needs is deciding what the starting situation of the individual is when being assessed against a sector-standard.

On the basis of a specific learning need a learning trajectory can be offered that is adapted to a specific context; this could be a diploma trajectory but also personal enrichment by learning in any form.

EVC may serve as a bridge between the competences needs of, on the one hand, the organisation and, on the other, the learner. This calls for two forms of EVC:

- Synchronizing competence systems of organisations on the one hand (with their competence management grounded in the function-descriptions, formulated in the (sector- or organisation-based) HRM-system and on the other hand the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) of schools and institutes, with their competence-based curricula and training programmes. The goal of this synchronization is to determine which competences and learning programmes can best be linked to the determination of the learning needs of the learner in the assessment of his/her portfolio; in this way the portfolio of the learner can be fed and upgraded from within the HRM and the (professional) educational and training system. This form of EVC is top-down oriented and strives for a harmony between competence systems in the areas of supply (education/training) and demand (sector, organisations).
- Through this synchronisation the learner can make clearer choices with regards to the strategies for enriching his/her portfolio. The recognition that the learner seeks (dependent on the learning goals that prevail in the EVC-set-up) can then be supported by a personalized procedure. In this way EVC can provide concrete indications of what the most appropriate learning route for personal development is. In doing so, the learner can also make use of the competence acquisition that can be supported from

within the own organisation or through external organisations. This form of EVC is bottom-up oriented and aims at creating a balance between personal and organisational development issues and links these issues to the most appropriate learning programmes and tailor-made designs. This links the portfolio of the learner with the sector's HRM and (potentially) also to the NQF.

7.2 Critical Success Factors

Various critical success factors concerning the further implementation of EVC in the Netherlands can be distilled from the policy-development and the practical evidence presented in this report. Concerning the subsequent phases in the sector-driven EVC-process these critical success factors are:

Phase 1: Preparation and recognition of competences

- Concentrating on marketing of EVC is highly important. The learner should be addressed especially.
- Collection of practical EVC-examples from all levels, i.e. on individual, organisational and systemic levels can assist in this marketing.
- Supportive infrastructure: communicate also existing, favourable legislation, financial arrangements and regulations for EVC.
- Educational awareness should be raised in an organisation or company: investing educationally in someone's potential always pays off.
- Communication and guidance on the why/how/what of EVC must be clear to the learner. This is linked to the provision of trained guides within the organisation/sector.
- Self-management of competences is crucial: in the division of roles between those involved, the emphasis for the learner is on personal process management; for the organisation on the formulation of learning needs; and for the education/training institutions on the development of flexible learning-made-to-measure programmes. This step involves the creation of personal portfolio-formats and – possibly – structured portfolio training and portfolio-guidance for employees.

Phase 2: Recognition of competences

- A candidate must work with a clear portfolio (format). Depending on the goal and the context there are three main forms available.
- Training-programmes for self-management of competences must be offered. Such a training is very helpful in designing, filling and managing one's portfolio.
- Setting standards involves selection of a standard from educational or human resource systems by the candidate dependent on goal and context of EVC.
- Guidance should be strengthened, especially in the 'empowerment-model'.
- The accessibility of a chosen standard is important in the candidate's self-management.

Phase 3: Validation and Assessment of competences

- Transparency, uniformity, harmonisation and collaboration at sector level and creating linkages with national qualifications is important.
- Match competence systems from organisations and education. EVC is the bridge.
- Impartial assessment must be safeguarded in the EVC procedures, so that an objective and independent assessment can take place.

- No distinction between diplomas acquired on the basis of formal, informal or non-formal learning needs to be the basis for the sector's learning culture.
- EVC should be possible at all qualification and function levels.

Phase 4: Further development of competences

- Organisations need to facilitate personal development plans, provide guidance and offer transparent competence management.
- Function-standards need to be formulated in terms of learning outcomes which are based on task-oriented competences.
- Education must value the workplace as a rich learning environment.
- Employees need to self-manage their personal development programmes as much as possible, when being active in an EVC procedure. This ownership means that it is up to them to make choices in the degree of self-determination or external direction within their development. These choices range between 100 percent self-management of form and content of the programme (empowering) and zero percent (pampering).

Phase 5: Embedding EVC

- Organisations must ensure that their formulation of demands is effective. This means that there is clarity concerning (1) the competences that are present within the organisation, and (2) the required competences within the framework of the organisational aims. 1 and 2 can be combined to ensure the development of (3) the competence demands within the organisation, and ultimately (4), an action plan for the recognition and development of available and required competences.
- Research into the effects of EVC: research is needed into the added value of EVC, among other things focussed on its economic, financial and social effects.
- Integration of EVC in HRM-systems: better integration of EVC into HR policy and practice and sector-based qualifications, aimed at enhancing employability and mobility, increasing voluntary participation and working towards achievable goals.
- Linkages with the NQF to enhance the role of learning within the sector.

8 Case studies: Practical consequences of the core elements

KIRA

Kira (30) has two children (14 and 9 years old), she has a secondary school leaving certificate (from a *secondary school*) but has not had any further education or training because she was busy looking after her children.

She has always done temporary work (as a temporary cleaner in different medical practices and as a care worker in a nursing home amongst others). She received workplace induction training for these jobs, but no recognised form of professional qualification.

Kira lives in a rural community in a district in the province of South Holland. The nearest large town (60,000 inhabitants) is approximately 30 minutes away on public transport and there is a lack of nearby education opportunities and resources.

Kira would have liked to take the bus in the past. However, this would have been incompatible with childcare and difficult due to the long working hours and commuting time involved.

Legal basis

The legal provisions in the Netherlands for the validation of informal learning are of some help to Kira. She is entitled to an access-assessment and possible certification of her informally acquired skills, especially since she has several years' professional experience. The fact that she has worked for different employers and in different jobs gives her good chances for obtaining exemptions for a qualification. This is because the VET-school where she is applying for a qualification has the obligation to do a proper intake on her chances for reaching out to a starting qualification on NQF-level 2. For this intake she only has to travel once to the nearby school by bus (30 minutes).

She could get quick access to external examinations when she succeeds in the language-test, which is a general obligation before one enters a level 1 or level 2 learning path. If she fails the language test (in Dutch!) the VET-school will not give her access to the qualification program, despite her informal right to it.

Process

Apart from this direct route to a qualification, there is another road possible for Kira.

Kira is also interested in using a competency passport, something that her job centre advisor brought to her attention as a possible option. She wants to gain a clearer impression of what she is capable of and of the potential future career options she could consider. When she is lucky her job centre advisor is familiar with the possibilities of such a training in a CH-Q training on self-management of competences. Then he/she would indeed give her the chance to invest in her self-management of competences and she could spend her 1000 euro (available budget if an advisor says ok) on this training.

Doing this training will need a lot of time-management and childcare solutions from Kira. The training takes about 5 sessions in a total of 20 hours. The potential impact has a lot of practical examples (role models) available, so if her advisor says ok, the impact is really expected that she can make decisions on the basis of her potential and a concrete action plan.

The child-care solutions are to be found in the community-budget and are linked to the advisory function of her advisor. She will also need to find child-care opportunities in her own circle (family, friends, neighbours, etc.).

Financing

Because Kira lives in a rural community, there is no professional guidance in the immediate vicinity, be this in the form of tutoring or a competency passport seminar. In order to participate in a training course, she would have to travel to the nearest city. Travel, accommodation and course fees would fit in her available budget. There is financial support available to her for this project.

Support

Kira talks about the issue of professional development with her female friends. They all agree that you would have to be very lucky indeed to obtain a better job without a certificate. One friend remembers that the job agency (*UWV*) sometimes gives financial support (such as education vouchers) for participation in seminars on professional reorientation and skills passports or the assessment procedures they use. Kira tries to get more information online and with success. She wishes that there were a central contact point (office, phone number, internet address), which you could use to get access to more information or to be referred to the relevant body or authority. Now she depends on the luck that her advisor is familiar with the potential impact of the training she wants.

BASTIAN

Bastian (29) lives in a small town in Limburg. He attended an academic *Gymnasium* secondary school, but only finished the 4th class (out of 6). He then began training to be a nurse at a VET-school, but dropped out after a year.

After breaking off his professional training, Bastian managed to break into IT as a 'lateral recruit'. He has gained four years' professional experience in a large industry company where he was responsible for network management and coordination of IT services.

Following job cuts and outsourcing of IT services, Bastian initially worked under an external service provider with a 12 month fixed-term employment contract. After this contract expired, he received no further offer of employment and has now been unemployed for the past five months.

Bastian has acquired expertise and experience in managing a small team and in network management thanks to working in this field for nearly 5 years. However, he has no formal proof of these skills apart from his employer reference.

Legal basis

Bastian has no legal right to have his informally acquired competencies assessed but he stands a good chance of benefitting from skills development measures because he is in the first year of unemployment. This means that in the medium term, he could meet admissions requirements for a VPL-procedure.

Process

Bastian is classified as a 'potential worker' at the job-agency. Therefore he is allowed to take part in a skills development program at a VET-school, which also serves as his preparation for external assessment. The program helps him (1) to fulfil the obligation in the language-test, (2) to do an intake-assessment – which is a kind of VPL-procedure - and to gain partial qualifications on the basis of exemptions for his work and learning experiences. Eventually this will lead to a full vocational qualification if he stays in line with the wishes of the VET-school. He only needs to fulfil the theoretical parts of the modules in the qualification. He can do this program part-time so that he can also work as a trainee in the IT-sector where he is guided to by his job-agency. Since IT-functions are needed

everywhere in the Netherlands in very sector, he can start as a trainee at a local hospital where they need to work with digital patient-dossiers. He's the right man in the right place for this since he has informal experience, is motivated and accepts that he also needs a qualification to get a job again. As a trainee he is a 'cheap' solution to the hospital, but if he is successful they will give him a 'normal' job.

Financing

Bastian is lucky: his unemployed status grants him access to a guided and partly funded program. The validation of his informally acquired competencies won't cost him a penny. Without the support offered by the funded program and qualification, he would not have considered external assessment as an option. Given that he would not have attempted this without some form of support and preparation, he himself would have had to shoulder the financial burden of getting professional guidance and attending preparatory courses.

Support

Bastian is lucky in that his job centre adviser recognised the potential in his professional career. Bastian himself did not know that he would be able to sit final assessment tests as an external candidate without first going through a full course of training. During his time in industry, no one drew his attention to the fact that he could acquire a formal qualification. In large companies, there are a lot of people within the IT sector who have changed careers as lateral recruits and then taught themselves on the job.

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