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Validation of Prior learning (VPL) in Europe's higher education- A focus on personalizing the VPL-model

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Summary: Validating Prior Learning (VPL) has become a crucial issue in Europe, enhanced both by organizations and institutions (top-down approach) and learners (bottom-up approach). The *Allinhe* project (Erasmus project 2011-2014, www.allinhe.eu) focused on target groups with special needs (50+, migrants and disabled people and intended to enhance multi-targeted and bottom-up approaches, using the VPL-methodology. This article presents the outcomes of this project by providing a theoretical approach together with a practical overview in several European countries and in South Korea with different institutional backgrounds and opens doors for VPL in Europe and abroad.

Keywords: Competences, Validation of Prior Learning, formal learning, non-formal learning, informal learning, personalized learning

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Introduction

Learning is more than ever important or valuable; people are encouraged to invest in their potential throughout their lives, taking into account their prior learning. According to policy papers of the UNESCO, European Union, OECD, national levels, and others, this should also concern the underrepresented groups and non-traditional learners with regard to higher education because the European knowledge-economy needs more higher-educated participation from all.

The European agenda on ‘the Social Dimension of Education and Training’ states that recognising prior learning and providing individualised support enhances participation of underrepresented groups and non-traditional learners in higher education (HE). The strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (*ET2020*) supports this. However, HE-institutions are still considering how to offer/support lifelong learning perspectives and making use of the added value of methods for Validation of Prior Learning (VPL). Some universities develop VPL-practices as an answer to economic and labour market needs; others use VPL as a way to widen access and participation of target groups, which are obstructed in getting access to HE.

Reality therefore called for action on making HE more accessible for underrepresented groups and non-traditional learners by focusing on flexible lifelong learning-strategies, opened up by a tailor-made VPL-approach. For this reason, the project “Access to Lifelong Learning in Higher Education (ALLinHE)” linked the issues of underrepresentation of specific target groups and the lack of practical VPL-approaches to a proposal for widening access to HE and for validation at HE-levels with the focus on sub-action “social inclusion in higher education”. Investigating this linkage in the period 2011-2014 resulted in an overview, showing the diversity of target groups one can work on for creating solutions for social inclusion of these groups in Europe’s HE.

The project aimed at making transparent the need in society for further developing, testing and implementing the VPL-methodology for the sake of enhancing a target group-orientation in higher education. This aim was grounded in developing, implementing and analysing a multi-targeted VPL-approach. This approach included the design and testing of a programme for professionalization of HE-staff in working with and in this approach. This set the objectives to a project in which the above formulated challenge was answered by enhancing the existing VPL-methodology as a multi-targeted approach for empowering and integrating underrepresented target groups by steering them towards their HE-learning opportunities; the 2nd objective in this project aimed at making universities more accessible and adapted to the lifelong learning-needs of the citizens.

1. Theoretical approach

Lifelong learning above all means ‘Validating Learning’, i.e. validating *the Learning* that is constantly taking place and learning *the Validating* in order to start up stimulating and developing lifelong learning in an effective and efficient way. Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) in this respect is not only a process underpinning lifelong learning strategies but also the organising principle for designing these strategies.

1.1 The project *ALLinHE*

The project *ALLinHE*¹ was based on the experiences of universities to transform into lifelong learning institutions. This is developed in a diversity of local/national realities, related to different national learning cultures in Europe. In this diversity of European experiences the project aims at contributing to the development goal in the EU to implement a sustainable competence-based learning culture in

1 The project “*ALLinHE*” – *Access to Lifelong Learning in Higher Education* was funded by the Lifelong Learning programme of the European Commission; Project nr. 517978-LLP-1-2011-1-NL-ERASMUS-ESIN.

which the EQF and its national-QFs interact with individual centred learning and validation practices for underrepresented and non-traditional target groups. Furthermore, there is an expected link with 'HRM-strategies' in which VPL is also used to match the need for formative development of competences in the work-context.

The project's aim was to create a learner centred and multi-targeted VPL-approach, opening up personalised, formative as well as summative perspectives on HE-levels. The target groups selected in each country differ with respect to national strategies and needs to integrate these groups in the higher educational institutions. In this way a broad range of target group-practices provides for a broad reservoir of 'best-practices'.

The objectives were:

1. To develop, implement and valorise a learner-centred and – above all – a broad approach of VPL that takes into account underrepresented groups and non-traditional learners in higher education through focusing on the guidance and individual assessment practices in the VPL process. This approach has to be multi-targeted to creating personalised, formative and summative learning opportunities in HE.
2. To professionalize the HE-professionals for working in and with this innovative VPL-approach by enhancing their competences as professionals in guidance, assessment, contextualised development of LLL-programmes, blended learning, customer-steered education & training.
3. To empower the target groups by personalising HE-steered learning on the basis of validating their prior learning outcomes in the multi-targeted VPL-approach, offering an integrated focus on personal (empowerment; personal development), formative (update/upgrade) and summative (qualification and certification) contexts and goals.

1.2 The multi-targeted VPL-approach

When designing a model for VPL addressing responsibilities of individual, organisation and university, the question arises how to link the learning needs of the individual with the (best) available learning facilities of the learning system and/or with the learning demand from the labour system. The premise is that VPL can serve as this linking-pin by focusing on the diversity of the learning goals of the individual:

- a. Economically aiming at getting and/or keeping a job (employability),
- b. Socially, aiming at motivation, reintegration, self-management of competencies and personal development (empowerment),
- c. Educationally, aiming at qualification, updating, upgrading, portfolio-enrichment by means of creating output-oriented standards (learning outcomes),
- d. For citizenship, aiming at social activation, voluntary activities, social awareness & reintegration and citizenship (activating citizenship),

The framework presented below in figure 1, gives the floor to VPL as such a multi-targeted linking-pin. It shows the theoretically possible modes of VPL that are applicable between the three primary actors in the process of lifelong learning. These modes or connections mainly occur in 'dialogues' between two of the three stakeholders; sometimes however a 'trialogue' between all three is possible or necessary to communicate on the specificities of a (lifelong) learning strategy.

All stakeholders in these 'dia- or trialogues' can optimize their learning-needs, -facilities and/or -goals, depending on the nature of the individual's need for learning (or development). In this resulting variety of approaches an equal variety in forms of mutual cooperation occurs. The framework represents therewith an integrated, multi-targeted approach to creating lifelong learning opportunities for all. The different validation-modes in the framework aim at linking any desired potential learning effect of the individual to tailor-made learning facilities in close relation with the given context and state of the art in someone's personal development process.

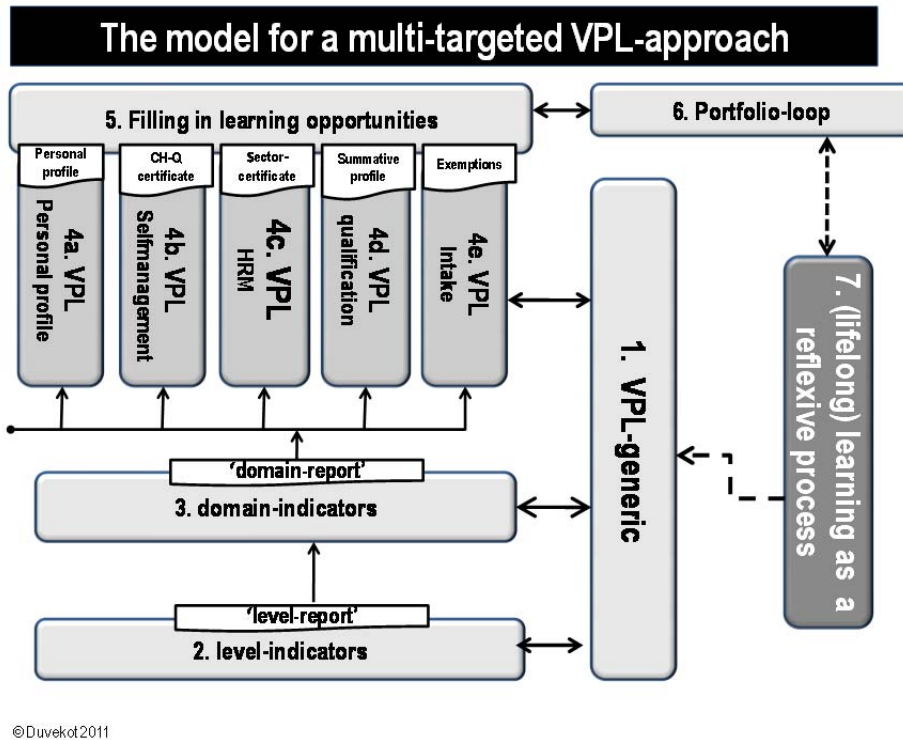


Figure 1 The ALLinHE model for a multi-targeted VPL-approach

The framework shows itself in an integrated approach in seven steps:

1. **VPL-generic** documents, organises, ranks and compares existing standards from learning (qualifications or vocational standards) and working (occupational standards) in a competence-databank.
2. The second step is about **level-indicators**. Scanning persons for their potential in general on a vocational education (VET)- or higher education (HE)-level. This step consists of a cognitive self-assessment. The questions are based on generic level-descriptors. Output is a general overview of the (potential) personal, cognitive level.
3. The next step on **domain/sector-indicators** builds on the preceding step. It links persons to more specific learning-domains and adds sectoral perspectives. The questions are based on qualification-descriptors and labour-market (sector) descriptors. Output is an overview of the personal potential measured against learning-domains & sectors.
4. The actual validation-modes are operationalized in the fourth step:
 - a. **VPL-personal** is a divergent approach in two different modes; both modes are about making transparent the totality of someone's learning outcomes:
 - i. The mode 4a is a personalised programme for making up one's portfolio. Recognition and documentation of all learning outcomes (so far) is at stake here. The desired effect is the empowerment of the individual, in the sense of a strong notion of self-awareness and personal value in relation to a pallet of social opportunities to be engaged in.
 - ii. The mode 4b is a group training-module for self-management of competences. This training is contextualised, depending on the background of the group members. Output is a certified personal portfolio with a personal action plan. The empowerment of the individual is here also at the heart of the group-process. The possible next steps to be taken by the individual are however reflected upon by the other group members, which results in a stronger activation of taking up personal, social opportunities than in form 4a.
 - b. **Formative VPL** is a convergent approach; it's about making transparent where someone stands when measured against a formative standard (HRM-standard; workbased/sectoral). Output is a certified professional report on work-related learning outcomes with an advice for further

learning steps. If expected, an extra module for helping an organisation to formulate its function-profiles can be applied; on the basis of these profiles the demand-articulation of an organisation can be 'negotiated' with the employees.

- c. **Summative VPL** is a convergent approach in two different modes; both forms make transparent where someone stands when measured against a summative standard (VET-qualifications). This approach leads to an overview of the value of prior learning outcomes when someone chooses for a specific qualification:
 - i. VPL for qualification in mode 4d is exploited as an independent assessment-procedure before one decides to enter a school or university in which the validation report can be accepted and can lead to a shortened course or programme.
 - ii. VPL for intake in mode 4e takes place after the decision of subscribing to a course or programme has been made. It is exploited as an intake-procedure for the validation of all prior learning outcomes within the desired course or programme. In this mode VPL directly leads to exemptions.
5. **Follow-up**, or turning the output of one of the VPL-approaches into lifelong learning action. The actual learning is by definition flexible in form (classes, digital, work-embedded, etc), content (modular, integral) and environment (at home, at work, in university, dual, etc.). This action can, depending on the kind of VPL-approach chosen, be focused on:
 - Personal competence development in a variety of learning opportunities for strengthening someone's performance in private life, work, citizenship, volunteering or a university-programme.
 - Formative learning steps in a professional context. The sectoral or HRM-standard sets the goals for further learning outcomes. It can focus on updating or upgrading a qualification, applicable to the HRM-standard.
 - Summative learning steps in a university-centred process. The aim is to get either a qualification or gain competences from a specific qualification programme.
6. The **portfolio-loop** is essential in determining the need for investment in "human capital". Successively (1) the learning goal in relation to the context is fixed, (2) the portfolio is taken as the basis for the steps to be taken, (3) this portfolio is validated, (4) the portfolio is then enriched with the outcomes of the recent learning trajectory and (5) finally the updated portfolio is taken as a fresh starting point for anticipating upcoming learning questions. The whole process of VPL-steered learning therewith begins and ends with the portfolio. This is called 'the portfolio-loop'.
7. The final stage in the framework is managing the dynamics of the portfolio for the sake of **reflexive learning**. The continuous process of portfolio-documentation, -validation and -enrichment is providing 'the fuel' for this self-management and leads to a pro-active attitude towards learning and personal development.

1.3 A broad interpretation of VPL

Evidence for a broad interpretation of VPL as process, procedure and principle comes from various research projects like "Managing European Diversity in lifelong learning 2005-2007" (Duvekot et al, 2007), "Quality in Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition for internationally Educated Nurses (Kleef, 2012), "Access to Lifelong Learning in Higher Education" (Duvekot et al, 2014a & 2014c), etc. These projects aimed at showing the outline of the learning society by analysing case studies in the profit, non-profit and voluntary sectors in Europe and Canada. The analysis supported the vision that 'Validation of Prior Learning' is as much a principle as a process, giving true evidence of the transition from the present knowledge society towards the learning society. Society changes to a learning society where the need for a good balance of power between the main stakeholders in lifelong learning - individuals, organisations and the learning system - will be reshaped and the learner will get a real say in designing lifelong learning strategies.

The main changes of this transition can be reflected on five levels:

- e. Economically, aiming at getting and/or keeping a job (employability),

- f. Socially, aiming at motivation, reintegration, self-management of competences and personal development (empowerment),
- g. Educationally, aiming at qualification, updating, upgrading or portfolio-enrichment by means of creating output-oriented standards focusing on learning outcomes and learning made to measure,
- h. A fourth level on which the change is having its impact, can also be distinguished, the civil society, aiming at social activation, voluntary activities, societal awareness & reintegration and citizenship (activating citizenship),
- i. On the macro-level finally, authorities and social partners are responsible for organising the match between these levels by means of legislation, regulations, labour agreements, fiscal policy, training funds, etc.

‘Validation of Prior Learning’ as an organising principle of lifelong learning reflects the change towards a learning society in which the individual learner has and takes more responsibilities for his/her own, personal learning process. It also means that the individual learner changes the existing ‘balance of power’ in learning processes because he/she will be steering lifelong learning too with a portfolio. In this portfolio, the learning outcomes that he/she has achieved are documented together with the relevant evidence. In many cases the portfolio even encompasses an action plan for personal development. Such portfolios create a new balance within learning as a process and contribute to the individual’s social identity; above all, they show the road map for personal development in the context of the organisation and the society.

The emphasis on learning outcomes is in line with the development of common structures of education and training across Europe and is associated with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and the European Qualification Framework (EQF). Thus Validation of Prior Learning as such contributes to the removal of barriers to the mobility of labour between countries and between sectors. At national levels, learning outcomes are made a central part of the modernisation of qualification systems and frameworks in order to innovate Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education (HE), to stimulate economic development and to promote social cohesion and citizenship. These goals of ‘Validation of Prior Learning’ are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 2: Goals of ‘Validation of Prior Learning’	
<i>Individual</i>	Stimulating self-investment in learning; showing learning outcomes; building up a learning biography or portfolio
<i>Organisation</i>	Building up competence management and facilitating employees’ self-investment and articulation of competences; designing lifelong learning strategies in Human Resource Management
<i>VET/HE</i>	Matching learning to real learning needs; offering learning-made-to-measure; focus on learning outcomes; facilitating lifelong learning strategies
<i>Civil Society</i>	Activating citizenship; transparency of learning outcomes in the civil society; linkages with other perspectives (qualification, careers)
<i>Macro-level</i>	Concerns policies of governments and social partners and their responsibilities for creating favourable conditions for lifelong learning through laws and regulations
Source: Duvekot et al., 2007	

Important preconditions for creating a learning society, in which these benefits come to full bloom:

1. A transparent, output-oriented knowledge infrastructure;
2. Creating trust by (a) focusing on the already available quality-system based on the judgement of the existing assessment processes used by schools, colleges and universities and (b) prospective quality-management by introducing external peer-reviews on quality-issues for the future;

3. A transparently structured education sector, that allows a flexible flow of participants from one layer of a sector to another, both intra- as well as inter-sectorial²;
4. Universal, transparent and interchangeable procedures and reports on the competences that have been valued;
5. Close relations between educational institutions and their associates/partners (enterprises, government institutions, institutions in the field of (re)integration of unemployed into the labour market);
6. Creating possibilities for developing and executing individual tailor made learning paths;
7. Facilities for financing flexible tailor made individual learning routes, such as an individual learning account;
8. Clear communication to citizens about the technical and financial arrangements for education and 'Validation of Prior Learning';
9. Development of an individual right for portfolio-assessment and career-advice.

1.4 Learning modes and the concept of competence

The development of the systematics of the Validation of prior learning (VPL) can best be understood as a confirmation of the shift towards empowerment as facilitated by personalised learning strategies. The understanding grows that the role of the learning system is changing from an institutionalised learning system with uniform learning paths and little room for personal input, into a learning system characterized by flexible and more individually steered learning (Duvekot et al, 2007). In England this is referred to as 'personalized learning' or the tailoring of pedagogy, curriculum and learning support to meet the needs and aspirations of individual learners (Hargreaves, 2004-2006). The same goes for the labour system in which the general norms on the functioning of workers are focused more and more on facilitating their further development instead of controlling labour top-down. One could even say that VPL is about democratising learning and working and, to stay in the terminology of Giddens, enhancing the reflexive character of learning itself.

The starting point of VPL is that initial training for a career no longer suffices. It is important to acknowledge that competences (knowledge, skills, attitude, aspirations) are constantly developing. This means validating that someone always and everywhere - consciously and unconsciously – learns through:

- *formal learning*, which 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*, which is learning embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) but with an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically does not lead to certification.
- *informal learning*, which results from daily work-related, family or leisure activities. 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. (Cedefop, 2009)

Competence is a central concept in VPL. Without a good understanding of this concept little can be achieved with VPL. 'Competence' means having adequate knowledge of how to act in a particular situation. Whether or not someone is competent becomes apparent based on how he/she acts (Lyotard, 1988). In other words, a competence is the sum of knowledge and skill: knowledge is 'the knowing' and skill is 'the acting'. A competence, then, encompasses knowledge and skill as well as the

2 'Intra-sector' refers to transfers of people within a sector, from one branch to another branch, whereas 'inter-sector' means a transfer from people from one sector to another sector.

personal methods used in applying that skill. It is essentially based on personal attitudes and ambitions. For this reason, a competence value is only partially fixed, as this value is mainly personal. The way in which a competence reaches a particular, personal value is also a part of that competence. For that reason, Cedefop's definition, which states that a competence is an ability that extends beyond the possession of knowledge and skills, is suited for learning objectives in any context. It includes: 1) cognitive competence; 2) functional competence; 3) personal competence; and 4) ethical competence (www.cedefop.gr; Cheetham & Chivers, 2005). It might also be useful to define these four elements as meta-competencies:

1. Cognitive competence is defined as the possession of appropriate work-related knowledge and the ability to put this to effective use.
2. Functional competence is defined as the ability to perform a range of work based tasks effectively to produce required outcomes.
3. Personal or behavioural competence is defined as the ability to adopt appropriate, observable behaviours in work related situations.
4. Ethical competence is defined as the possession of appropriate personal and professional values and the ability to make sound judgments based upon these in work related situations.

The 'personal competence' is particularly relevant, because it is this competence that 'colours' the generic description of a competence. It is only within this personal context that a competence can be identified, assessed, valued and developed (further).

Based on this concept of competence, VPL is particularly useful as an evaluation, not connected to the learning path, of the personal development of competences. This perspective, however, reduces VPL to a kind of intake assessment. It also turns the individual into a passive learner. VPL's potential as a vision on personal development, however, as well as an instrument, is much larger than that. VPL needs to be used on a much larger scale, especially in approaches geared more towards the individual. After all, VPL can motivate the individual to take more initiatives in personal development. Educational institutions, companies and other organizations can then fine tune their educational and personnel policies in line with this.

1.5 Three approaches

In particular, VPL makes 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. Validating and placing value on competences is also known as the *passive* or *summative* VPL approach. When VPL also stimulates further learning – that is, places a value on competences – this is called *activating* or *formative* VPL. These are the three main streams within VPL. A third form is focused on the person him- or herself and can be considered as a reflective form of VPL in which the individual is undergoing a process of self-Validation.

The methodology for Validation of Prior Learning takes many shapes and destinations. These can all be captured in three main modes:

1. **Reflective VPL** takes the whole learning biography of an individual as the focus for building up a portfolio and action plan. Only after this is done, the individual makes a choice on taking action: which standard to link to, which stakeholders to address, which learning goal, etc. A high level of (social) reflexivity can be defined by an individual shaping his/her own norms, desires and objectives. It refers to the notion of autonomy of the individual.
2. **Summative VPL** is about building up a portfolio against a pre-set standard, with a one-dimensional goal of looking for access and exemptions or direct improvement in terms of job-profiles.

3. **Formative VPL** aims at further development by linking a portfolio with any given standard in learning or working arenas for deciding on what/where/how to learn further, or formulating a career-step with the portfolio as a starting point.

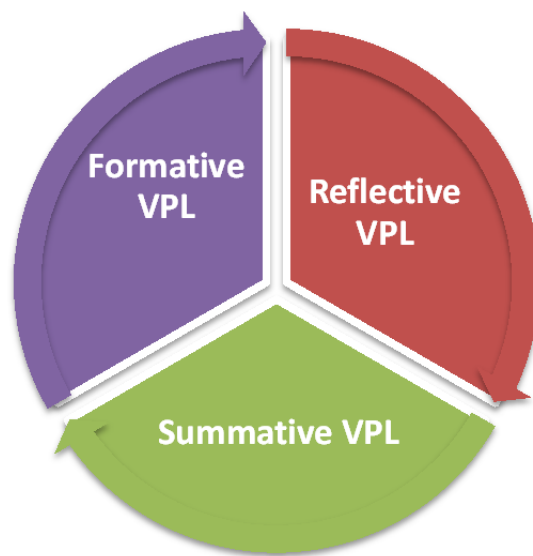


Figure 3: The 3 modes of VPL- © Duvekot 2014b

The difference between these approaches is that in a summative and formative VPL process the focus is on validating someone's development against a pre-set standard. Evidence for such validation 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 VPL-process is official Validation for learning accomplishments within a qualification or certificate. The award is captured in exemptions or (sometimes) in full qualifications and/or certificates.

The formative process goes a step further than summative VPL. The objective is further developing one's competence on the basis of learning evidence and recognized against a pre-set standard in learning (qualifications, certificates) and/or working (function profiles in human resources management). In this sense, summative VPL can be seen as part of formative VPL.

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, union representatives, mediators, teachers, trainers, etc.

1.6 From portfolio to *portfolio-loop*

The portfolio is the most important prerequisite for implementing VPL. Portfolios are used to plan, organize and document education, work samples, informal activities and skills. People can use portfolios to apply to school or training programmes, get a job, get a higher salary, show transferable skills, track personal development or more holistically, answer the question who they are and what their ambitions can/may be.

In general there are three types of portfolio:

1. A *dossier portfolio* is used to document proof for getting exemptions in a specific degree or qualification programme. The proof consists of professional products and behaviour results. This portfolio acts as a showcase for a summative APL-procedure. It is only filled with the necessary

proof and is hardly steered by the candidate. Its nature is reflective, for the learning results that are of importance.

2. The *development-portfolio* focuses on broad, personal reflection. Its nature is reflective as well as prospective. It is filled with all relevant, lifewide proof of the candidate. Its nature is diagnostic for summative as well as for formative purposes. It is strongly steered and managed by the candidate (Tillema, 2001).
3. The *personal portfolio* also aims at documenting learning results from the past. It can be used for any VPL-procedure and is highly (self-)reflective. The candidate first fills the portfolio with descriptions of his/her activities and achievements so far. Then he/she reflects on these activities by describing the personal competences that were necessary in the activity. This self-reflection can be strengthened by reflection from 'third parties'. The outcome of this process is a personalized portfolio that provides answers to questions like 'what are my strengths and weaknesses?', 'what are my key-qualities?', 'how can I build further on my personal achievements?', etc. Only then he/she might make up a personal action plan and decide to choose a specific developmental goal. Such a personal portfolio has a holistic character since it covers the person's lifespan and experiences regardless of external standards (also see www.ch-q.nl/english).

By working with a portfolio most people go through a cyclical process:

- Which of my competences are strong developed or weak?
- Which of my competences fit in with my career- or learning needs?
- How to show my value to others?
- How to develop myself further?

When asking oneself these questions by looking at the personal development-potential, people can decide which portfolio-type will meet their personal needs. In all cases, the portfolio is taken as a starting point for new learning issues from a VPL-embedded situation. The entire process of Validation, then, begins and ends with the portfolio since the new learning or development results will be added to the original portfolio. This enriched portfolio might at the same time be the basis for new development steps and start a new VPL process. This is known as the "portfolio loop" (Duvekot 2006).

1.7 The VPL-process

VPL in general consists of five phases: commitment and awareness of the value of one's competences, recognition of personal competences, valuation and/or validation 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 2005).

Together these five phases constitute the VPL-process:

Phase 1: Commitment and awareness

An individual has to be 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. A competence is actually to know how to act in a certain way. Whether someone is competent becomes clear from his or her actions. Society has a major interest in capitalising on this, whether through formal learning pathways in the school system during certain periods in life or through Non-formal and informal pathways in other periods.

For organisations, it is vital to understand that investing in people means investing in the goals of the own organisation. This awareness should culminate in setting specific targets for the investment in individuals and the support the organisation can give to this *human resource development*.

This phase consists of two steps: raising awareness and setting the targets for VPL within the specific context. This phase is the real critical success factor for VPL since if an organisation doesn't experience the necessity to think or rethink its mission and connect the results of this to the need to strengthen or

even start up a pro-active form of human resource management. In general, this phase takes as much time as the other four phases together!

Phase 2: Recognition

Identifying or listing competences is usually done with the help of a portfolio. Apart from a description of work experience and diplomas, the portfolio is filled with other evidence of competences acquired. Statements from employers, professional products, references, papers or photos undeniably show the existence of certain competences. The evidence can be aimed at the profession or position the VPL procedure is developed for. In other cases it can be an 'open' portfolio or a complete overview. Evidence is sometimes aimed at valuation, in other cases at personal profiling. The participant compiles the portfolio him/herself, with or without help.

This phase has a preparatory and a retrospective step. First the actual need for competences in the organisation in the different function-profiles is analysed. 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 valuation or assessment of competences

Then the content of the portfolio is being valued or assessed, when necessary, followed by an extra assessment. This usually takes place by observation during work or by means of a criterion based interview. Assessors compare the competences of an individual with the standard that has been set in the given context. That standard will be used to measure the qualities of the participant. His/her learning path followed is unimportant, only the results count. This second step results in either a validation on an organisational, sector or national level in the form of certificates, diplomas or career moves, or in a valuation in the form of an advice on career-opportunities.

This phase needs different steps:

- Setting the standard of the specific VPL-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 valuation itself, being the assessment of the portfolio and valuing it with correspondence to the given standard and targets of the organisation;
- The validation of the learning evidence within the given standard.

After this phase, the retrospective part of the VPL-process is concluded. The next phases concentrate on the prospective power of VPL.

Phase 4: the development plan

This phase of the VPL procedure aims at the development of the individual by turning the validation and/or advice into a personal action plan. On the basis of the valued competences and clarity about the missing competences or available strong competences, a personal development plan is made up. This plan is about learning activities that will be done in formal or non-formal learning environments, in work situations, during a change of position, by offering coaching or by creating an environment in which informal learning is stimulated.

This phase has two steps. First, a match is 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 his 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 VPL

The last phase of the VPL-process focuses at the structural implementation of VPL in a personal strategy for updating the portfolio or in the human resource management (HRM) of an organisation.

The results of a VPL-pilot have to be evaluated in order to show the way the implementation can take place on a 'made-to-measure basis'. An organisation should be able to use VPL structurally for the specific goals that had been set in the pilot. Any new goals should also be added easily to this new policy. The same goes for the reciprocity of setting learning goals by the individual him/herself in the dynamic learning society.

VPL offers a personal development-strategy in which the organisation-context and public/private services are crucial for keeping up with the speed of competence-development in the learning society. On the individual level this calls for filling in the five phases of VPL. These five phases take in total ten steps as shown in figure 4.

Figure 4: The process of 'Validation of Prior Learning'

Phase	Step + question	Action individual
I. Preparation	1. awareness <i>Where and how did I learn so far?</i> <i>Which necessity is there for self-investment?</i>	Open mind to lifelong learning. Inventory of personal learning wishes. Start self-management of competences.
	2. setting targets <i>Which learning targets are relevant?</i>	Self-assessment. Personal SWOT-analysis. Formulate learning targets.
II. Recognition	3. setting a personal profile <i>how to determine the need for competences?</i>	Writing a personal profile. Choosing a portfolio-format.
	4. retrospection <i>how to describe and document learning outcomes/prior learning?</i>	Filling in a portfolio. If needed, portfolio-guidance.
III. Valuation & Validation	5. standard setting <i>what is the relevant standard related to the targets?</i>	Choosing a standard to refer to. Re-arranging the personal portfolio. Self-assessment. Inventory of career-opportunities.
	6. valuation <i>How to get valued?</i>	Valuation of the portfolio. Getting advice on certification- and career opportunities.
	7. validation <i>How to get validated?</i>	Turning the advice into proper certification and career-evaluation.
IV. Development	8. prospection <i>How to set up a personal development plan (PDP)?</i>	Turning validation into a PDP for reasons of certification, employability, empowerment. Arranging learning-made-to-measure.
	9. implementing a PDP <i>Working on learning targets</i>	Executing the PDP.
V. Implementation	10. Structural implementation & empowerment <i>How did it go? If ok, how to embed VPL structurally in a personal lifelong learning strategy?</i>	Evaluation of the process. Maintaining portfolio-documentation.

Source: Duvekot, 2005.

In the figure a few elements are crucial:

1. **Raising awareness** of the necessity and opportunities of lifelong learning for individuals in any given context is the heart of the process of validating/valuing prior learning. Without this, learning

will remain school- or company-steered and cannot effectively be based on individual talents and ambition.

2. In Phase II **the portfolio** is introduced as the red thread in the process. After learning targets have been set, the portfolio is designed and filled; its content is assessed and an advice is added on possible qualification- and career-opportunities; it is subsequently enriched by learning-made-to-measure and finally, the starting point of a new process in which new learning targets can be formulated. The portfolio, so to say, is on the one hand both the starting as well as the end point of the individual learning process. On the other hand any end point is again the starting point of a new learning process. This is called a *portfolio-loop*.

3. In Phase III **self-assessment** is the crucial element because without this a person can only partially become co-maker of his/her personal development. A person needs to be focused on his/her own prior learning achievements before making a link with a pre-set standard in learning or working processes.

There are different methods available for self-assessment, such as the Swiss *CH-Q* instrument (Schoor et al, 2003). It is an integral system, consisting of methods for building a portfolio, (self-) assessment, career- & action-planning, quality control and accompanying training programmes. In general methods like CH-Q aim at personal development or career-planning and/or creating flexibility and mobility of the individual learner to and on the labour market. They create added value by revitalising individual responsibility or co-production by:

1. providing the basis for a goal-oriented development and career-planning,
2. the stimulation of personal development,
3. the support of self-managed learning and acting,
4. stimulating young and adults to document continuously their professional- and personal development

4. **The role of the assessor** is vital for starting up personal development in any kind of form. Reliable assessment is the *bridgebuilder* between a portfolio, including a personal action plan, and the specific development steps advised by the assessor. In any given context, an assessment-policy has three functions: (1) raising levels of achievement, (2) measuring this achievement reliably and (3) organising the assessment cost-effectively.

Assessment in this broad context is the judgement of evidence submitted for a specific purpose; it is therefore an act of measurement. It requires two things: evidence and a standard scale. (Ecclestone, 1994). Evidence is provided with the portfolio (or showcase) of the candidate. The standard that will be met, depends on the specific objective of the candidate. This means that the role of the assessor is all the more crucial because this professional has to be flexible with regard to the many objectives in order to be able to provide a custom-oriented validation and/or valuation. On top of that the professional should be able to use dialogue-based assessment forms. On the basis of the advice of such an assessor further steps for personal development will be set in motion. The choice of a specific assessor role largely depends on the objective of the assessment, which can vary greatly. Assessments for formal validation of competences with certificates or exemptions for accredited training programmes demand the involvement of an assessor from an institution offering competence-based accreditation and adequate measures to guarantee the quality of the assessor. Assessments for accrediting competences at the company or institution level or merely to acquire insight into someone's competences do not require the involvement of an institution offering competence-based certification. In these cases, the assessor is also often a colleague, supervisor or the individual himself.

5. In order to guarantee **good 'quality' of the assessor** on the one hand and prevent the rise of a new quality control-bureaucracy on the other hand, it is recommended to formulate a 'quality-light' procedure for validation-procedures. A further advantage of a 'quality-light' procedure is that it is cost-effective and more transparent to candidates. Possibilities for organising such a 'quality-light' approach are:

- any assessor should first design and fill in his/her own portfolio and personal action-plan; only then they can be given entrance to assessor-trainings,

- a professional register for assessors should guarantee their assessment-competences and professionalism,
 - every two years a new assessor accreditation should guarantee professionalism by ensuring assessor quality. Assessor quality can be maintained by means of refresher and updating courses. This new accreditation could be carried out by an official national agency, and tripartite governing (authorities and social partners),
 - quality of assessors implies being able to refer to a standard for assessors: this standard needs accreditation in a given national application (a role for the government).
6. Regarding the **development-steps** one might say that, when following the personalized path of VPL, lifelong learning is extended to a wider range of objectives, not only from learning to certification but also from learning to empowerment and employability. This calls for a strong involvement of the different stakeholders. Stakeholders that are involved in establishing systems for validation should not only be 'educationalists' and ministries but also employers and trade unions. VPL calls for a clear responsibility of not only certification-systems but also from human resource systems.
7. Proper **evaluation** and **feedback** finally is necessary to structurally embed the process into personal behaviour.

1.8 Macro-, meso- and micro-typology

In order to gather information in the partner-countries that could provide an overview of the state of the art concerning the design and application of VPL systematics, three information-levels were taken into account: the macro-level, the meso-level and the micro-level. The macro-level sets the top-down approach. The other two levels (meso- and micro-levels) are directly involved in the bottom-up approach.

The macro-level concerns the general background in which the Valuing a Prior Learning process could be implemented. It presents and explains the legislation adopted, mainly in the past ten years, on a national level, in order to offer a legal background for individuals to have an access to a diploma or certification on the basis of the experience they have gained at work, in the home and during leisure time activities (including voluntary involvement). Validating non-formal and informal learning has been seen, in most of the European countries, since the beginning of the 21st Century, as a way of improving lifelong and lifewide learning (Cedefop, 2009). Many questions were asked: the key national legislation governing VPL, the key organisations involved in the administration of VPL and as a result if any national guidance existed, the national strategy driving the legislation, the opportunities of financing and if any national policy for financing existed (for instance focused on target groups with special needs), how far the VPL legislation correlated to equality and diversity legislations in the country, the relationship of VPL to the national qualification framework, how far the quality-assurance system for VPL was organised.

The meso-level is focussed on the organisations and the professionals working in them to implement practically, on the ground, the VPL process. This is the intermediate level between institutions (in charge of legislation and rules) and the individuals (VPL candidate). There is a wide range of policy-makers and practitioners involved in developing and implementing validation arrangements at different levels (Cedefop, 2009). Many questions were also raised: the key organisations involved in the implementation of VPL together with their responsibility, the dispatching of the tasks (supporting VPL candidates, evaluators, final decision makers), the main VPL functions to be filled by councillors together with their quality (and different profiles), the ways candidates are supported in the process (application to be filled, assessment, finance, indication on the effectiveness of VPL, records maintained), the main barriers identified in the different countries to the VPL process, which sectors were the best introduced with a focus on the voluntary sector, the success factors.

Last but not least, the micro-level focuses on the individuals, the candidates to a VPL process. It was important to know who informed them on the VPL, how far the information was accessible, the main motivations for applying for a VPL (e.g. access to employment, training for improving a professional career, etc.), the institutional barriers to a VPL (depending on the learning context but also the working context), the personal barriers (self-confidence, family support...), the key people they usually address and who would support them when they make applications for a VPL, which role they play in the process (different levels were offered: independent, client to be guided, no control), if any training for self-management existed, what would be the costs linked to a VPL process, the main reason for a failure, success stories of VPL candidates.

2 From theory to practice

The central question in the project was 'how to activate VPL as an effective instrument for linking competences and credits in lifelong learning that appeals to citizens, strengthens their empowerment and also is beneficial to the other stakeholders in society?'. With this question in mind, we aimed at showing the potential of VPL as a matchmaker between these stakeholders and the critical success factors for developing and implementing VPL in a diversity of contexts. In all contexts the VPL-process follows more or less the same phases and steps. This can help in demonstrating how and where to set up interventions for strengthening VPL as a matchmaker for the sake of creating time- and money-effective and - above all – efficient lifelong learning-strategies with a variety of learning objectives and on a win-win-win-basis for 'me', 'my organisation' and 'my learning provider'.

VPL can in this respect best be explained in the following statements:

- VPL shows the real human potential on the basis of the analysis and validation of personal competences, preferably by documentation in a portfolio.
- VPL is the process of assessing and valuating/validating personal competences within a specific socio-economic context and offering a personal development strategy.
- Organisations benefit from VPL since individuals develop within their context.
- The VPL process in general consists of five phases: commitment and awareness of the value of one's competences, validation of personal competences, valuation and/or 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.

2.1 The perspectives of VPL

Crucial in practising VPL is acknowledging the self-managing role of the 'empowered' learning individual in making lifelong learning a reality! The active participation of individuals in decisions about form and content of lifelong learning and the implementation of lifelong learning strategies from work-based or school/university-based is supported by VPL for many perspectives:

- 1 ... *for improving opportunities for empowerment and deployment*: improved empowerment and deployment of individual talent is the most important motivation underlying VPL. It increases the opportunities for the individual in one's private life and on the labour market by highlighting the competences he or she already has and how these competences can be deployed and strengthened. This can apply both to those already in employment and to job seekers. For employers and trade unions, the emphasis lies on improving the employability of employees within the working context.
- 2 ... *for creating a more demand-led labour market*: improving the match between the learning system and the labour system is essential for the organisation of VPL. In order to improve "deployability", labour market functions must be expressed in terms of competences. These competences must in turn be linked to a demand for learning. The learning system must be receptive, transparent, flexible and demand-led in order to be able to provide the customised

approach required.

- 3 ... *for making learning more flexible*: the validation of informally and non-formally acquired competences will boost people's desire to keep on learning, i.e. will promote lifelong learning, since the accreditation of competences can lead directly to an award of or exemptions for qualifications. The validation approach can also make visible or recognisable existing competences and qualifications within or outside the labour process. This promotes the transparency of the many opportunities for learning. The learner will not only want to learn in a customer-oriented fashion but will also know better than now how, what and when to learn, and why he is learning.
- 4 ... *for optimising other forms of learning*: other learning environments and forms of learning must be formulated and/or utilised more effectively, since VPL also shows which learning environment and/or form of learning is best for a particular individual. This could include (combinations of) on the job training, mentoring/tutoring, independent learning, distance learning, and so on. The validation of competences and qualifications will inevitably lead to an adjustment of the existing qualification structure in professional education. The existing description of exit qualifications in the current qualification structure for professional education does not always tie in with the competences required on the labour market.

So, there's a lot to gain with VPL. Before moving towards the practice of VPL, it is useful to describe a framework for the models of VPL-enhanced lifelong learning strategies that can be used for describing and analysing practical case studies in a diversity of contexts: across sectors, types of organisations and learning environments; with different target groups, personal approaches and goals; in the diversity of dialogues between the learner, the learning system and the labour system. The 'practice' of VPL is revealed in four main strategies.

2.2 Four models for VPL-enhanced learning strategies

Validating Learning is intended to recognise and to value both visible and invisible skills of people. It is not focused on highlighting the lack of knowledge and skills but precisely the opposite – to take stock of existing knowledge and skills. In VPL-practices this vision is always acknowledged; the 'face' of VPL may differ however and shows itself in four main models of Validating Learning as:

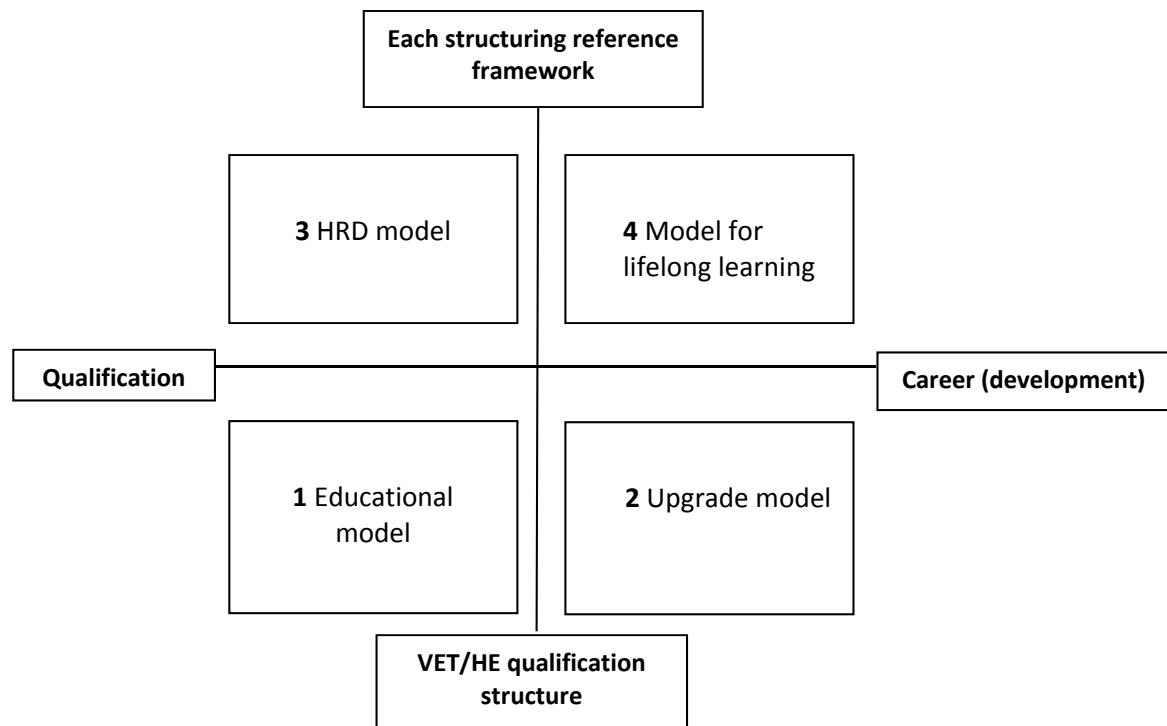
1. an *educational model* for initiating a particular qualification;
2. an *upgrade model* for determining educational/training needs of organisations or individuals;
3. a *HRD model* for matching employees' competences to organisational aims;
4. a *lifelong learning-model* for supporting personal development.

Procedures for Validating Learning are implemented in a variety of ways. Three steps can always be distinguished: identifying competences and raising awareness (recognition), assessing competences (assessment) and planning new learning activities (personal development). Possible implications of these procedures are promoting personal self-management of competences and personal development activities. Apart from building bridges between non formal and formal learning and between education and the labour market in order to facilitate lifelong learning from the diversity of perspectives on the four models is at the heart of implementing Validating Learning as a principle in VET and HE.

Despite the diversity, a structure can be defined for the demand and supply sides within the broad field of validation-services. The structuring is based on *the objective* (what is the expected effect?) and *the context* (which reference framework or benchmark is applied?).

Interpreting these two lines as a pair of axes, gives us four fields in which Validating Learning can be used to serve a particular goal within a particular context: the four models of Validating Learning.

Figure 5: the 4 models of 'Validating Learning'



Source: Feenstra et al, 2003.

A short typology of the four models produces the following description:

1. Validating Learning as a bridge between VET/HE and the labour market: the educational model

The function of validating learning in this model is aiming primarily at providing qualification on the levels of VET and HE. The two most important forms in which this model occurs:

- Traditional exemption policy based on previously acquired qualifications, which looks only at prior formal education and the relevant certificates;
- Exemption policy based on broader evidence; competences acquired non-formally or informally are also assessed.

A proper quality of the qualification is the primary benchmark, as it must be *recognized and accredited* on the responsibility of the provider (the qualifying educational institution). The goals that applicants aim to achieve by obtaining qualifications, and whether qualification is the best way to reach these goals, are not the provider's primary concern. In this model, the provider supplies a good quality product: qualifications and diplomas for competences acquired elsewhere.

Development is offered in this sphere by providing a customized, educational package.

2. Validating Learning as model for acquisition of initial qualifications: the upgrade model

Validating Learning in this model focuses on the contribution made by accreditation and certification to obtaining or retaining employment. Forms that occur in this sphere are:

- Validation and accreditation of competences that have been acquired (formally and informally) in the context of the occupation pursued by the candidate. The procedure and tools used are tailored as far as possible to the individual work environment.
- Validation and accreditation of competences that have been acquired (formally and informally) in the context of the occupation that the candidate intends to maintain or pursue.

Validating Learning is tailored to the employment goals of the candidate. The competences in his/her specific context are tailored to that objective. Obtaining initial qualifications in an effective and efficient way is at the heart of this model: only the necessary training – if needs be – has to be formulated.

Providers select and design the way in which the whole process is shaped, and within that process educational institutes act as suppliers of all or part of the services. Development is provided by offering customized forms of both formal learning and informal learning.

3. Validating Learning as model for upgrading competences within any structured context: the HRD model

In this model Validating Learning is aiming primarily at the validation of competences (provision of diplomas, qualifications or partial certificates) outside the context of VET/HE.

People acquire competences that cannot always be related to existing VET/HE-qualifications in a variety of ways, in formal and informal learning and/or in work situations. Sector training institutes, company schools and voluntary organizations with a high professional content (sports associations etc.) are examples of organisations (or providers) that work with validation of competences based on other standards.

The aim of Validating Learning in this model is to upgrade individuals within their specific context in order to keep them employable and provide them with concrete career opportunities. The provider supplies a good quality product: certificates and diplomas for competences acquired elsewhere. Personal development is offered by providing validation and learning at the workplace.

4. Validating Learning as model for lifelong learning

The fourth model may be viewed as the integrated model within which the other three spheres are subsumed. 'Lifelong learning' outlines the situation of members of our society who are engaged in a process of self-development in line with their own development requirements on the one hand and the demands of their environment on the other. This model shows the learning individual who is developing himself or herself continuously and in that process makes use of the facilities provided for the validating the competences that he or she has acquired personally or professionally. He/she might also use them to make it clear what he or she has to offer to employment organizations and other collaborative efforts.

The many forms in which this model emerges are offered by providers (employment organizations, head-hunters for senior posts, employability coaching) who guide individuals in the development of their portfolios. Where necessary, teachers and trainers act to certify competences. The characteristic feature is that the development programme is determined and controlled by the person in question. While institutions facilitate and provide support, they do not set the direction.

3 VPL in practice

The first level of interpretation of the multi-targeted VPL-model in its variety of contexts, target groups, modes of learning and learning objectives is on the level of nationally describing and analysing the macro-, meso- and micro-levels in which VPL operates. The second level is the level of good practices that illustrate the way to act in the different modes of the VPL-enhanced learning strategies, for the benefit of employees and employers as well as learning facilitators and society as a whole.

3.1 National interpretation

Several countries present a clear picture of the different national levels in which VPL can and/or needs to operate in case of a multi-targeted VPL-approach.

3.1.1 France³

On a macroeconomic level, the national strategy driving the legislation has started in France since 1934 when a specific procedure was set up to allow "home engineers" working for a firm without having the diploma of "engineer" to reach this diploma. In the seventies, and the improvement of continuous education, it appeared that it would be more economical to set up curriculum according to

3 Benedicte Halba, Iriv , Paris, 2014.

the needs of the target groups concerned, by taking into account their prior learning. In the eighties a national policy trend proposed to increase the number of people entering into higher education and so open the doors to direct access to Higher Education without having the Baccalauréat (compulsory diploma in the first place). The Law n°92-678 of the 20th of July 1992 promoted by the Ministry of Labour created the “Validation des acquis professionnels (VAP)”. Ten years after, was adopted a new national legislation with the Law n°2002-73 of the 17th of January 2002 so-called as “Loi de modernisation sociale “ setting a new paradigm named “Validation des acquis de l’expérience” or VAE. Since 2002, many points have been integrated in the VPL process focusing on the profiles of the candidates (house keepers, engineers, volunteers...) and/or on the kind of activities (paid, unpaid or voluntary activities such as family duties, volunteering...) in order to be as comprehensive as possible in the non-formal and informal learning perspective.. It can be used as a basis to award full qualifications, rather than just units or “parts” of a full diploma and so can be equivalent to a complete assessment leading to an award of formal qualifications. Five main points are underlined: VPL for access to diploma or certification with a professional goal (Labour Code & Education Code) ; VPL for access to national diploma of Higher Education (Education Code) ; VPL for mothers or any person with family duties in order to have an access to a national diploma of Higher Education (Education Code); a special “holiday” is offered in order to follow the process of VPL ; a special point is underlined for engineer with a State Diploma.

On a meso-economic level, the national guidance on VPL is provided by the National Vocational Certification Commission (CNCP- <http://www.cncp.gouv.fr/>). It was created with the 2002 Law in order to provide information about the process of VPL, to decide the validity of the application, to propose a portfolio or “file” to be filled by the candidate describing her/his experience, to provide information on the “jury” to be constituted. Some documents or practical guides are also provided by trade-unions and training bodies. In complement, a public portal on VPL was implemented explaining the different ways to have an access to VPL for VPL candidates but also for organisations in charge of VPL.

The main organisations in charge of implementing VPL in France, on the ground, are: the Association for Vocational training for adults (AFPA) (<http://www.afpa.fr/>) ; the National Employment Agency (<http://www.pole-emploi.fr/>); the VPL network among Universities (<http://francevae.fr/>) ; the regional councils (26 in France) responsible for Employment and Training (list provided on: <http://www.arf.asso.fr/>); the Chambers of Commerce also proposed supports for candidates to VPL (<http://www.cci.fr/>) ; some Ministries are directly involved in VPL such as the Ministry for Education and Higher Education (<http://www.education.gouv.fr/>), a special organisation called GRETA is also responsible for VPL among the National Education ; another Ministry involved in the VPL process is the Ministry for Labour , Employment, Vocational Training and social Dialogue (<http://travail-emploi.gouv.fr/>) ; training bodies such as Astrolabe provides training for target groups with special needs.

On a microeconomic level, the information for VPL candidates is accessible mainly after an interview with a counselor at the National Agency for Employment or at the Cité des Métiers. It is not very accessible without any support from a professional in the first place. The information through Internet may be very administrative and the presentation may be partial or unclear for a candidate. Especially the information provided by the CNCP is not so easy to understand or use. The individuals may also obtain support from other candidates to VPL they have met in a professional context but also a family context or social context (association for instance) and from trainers in the training bodies they are paying to support them in the process.

There isn't any training for self-management of competences available but there are many books on competences (Human and social sciences) such as the ones written by G. le Boterf in France. There are also many grids offered on competences such as the referentials in different economic sectors (référentiels métiers). There is an existing repertory for competences: the so-called ROME (Répertoire Opérationnel des Métiers et de l'Emploi) together with a description of the diploma/certification

provided by the RNCP (Répertoire National des Certifications professionnelles). There is also software to identify skills and competences. All these references may be quite inspiring to express one's experience in terms of competences and so to prepare or to implement a VPL process. The VPL process may be financed within the institution in different ways: depending of the profile of the candidate: if they have received a financial support (by the National Agency or the regional council): the financing is given to the institution in charge of the VPL. It may also depend on the nature of the institution: if it is a public authority or receiving public support for the VPL process for instance the Cité des Métiers, the support is free for the candidates

The national perspectives on VPL in France are good in general despite some remaining obstacles. On the one hand, the main barriers perceived by the implementation of VPL are the lack of financing provided by public institutions to support the candidates; the lack of information on the VPL process and sometimes the misinformation provided to the candidates; the lack of motivation or discouragement of the candidates as this is a long and demanding process. The main institutional barriers are, in a learning context, the length of time to have an access to the expected diploma/certification which may be long and uncertain. In a working context, the reward after having achieved a VPL process may also be deceiving for the candidate (no increase of salary nor better position). On the other hand, the main successes reported for VPL: speaking the language of competences; being aware of education/training opportunities; being able to express an experience in terms of competences; being more flexible in a professional career (changing the sector or the position); being more confident in one's professional potential.

3.1.2 Switzerland⁴

On a macroeconomic level, Validation is admitted by the Federal laws regulating VET and PET⁵ as a means for gaining a qualification. The fundamental legal basis for VPL is provided by the Vocational Professional Education and Training Act (VPETA - 13.12.2002) – art. 9, 32 and 33, concerning qualification processes and procedures in VET⁶. This act regulates VET and PET pathways (Tertiary B sector). VPL procedures for VET qualifications are regulated by the National Guidelines for validating prior learning outcomes (NGVPL) (www.validacquis.ch). These guidelines were conceived as general guidelines for the development of VPL in any educational sector. They were recently confirmed by the Federal Authorities of VET (BBT/OFFT). Concretely, VET, PET (Tertiary B sector) and higher education (HE) are submitted in Switzerland to different regulations, involving diverse actors and stakeholders. The tertiary A sector (Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences - UAS) is regulated by a Federal law only considering UAS. Universities are practically free to self-organize themselves. The act contains some principles that are referring to the need of taking charge of prior learning outcomes, acquired in different settings, opening the road in this way to integrating VPL. A federal act aiming at coordinating HE in this respect is under discussion. Existing rules give a relevant autonomy to the Institutions as far as admission is concerned (including validation of prior learning). Nevertheless, at the moment VPL is only marginally practiced in this sector. A new federal act – expected to be in force in 2015 – will define general rules for the Continuing Training sector, including a general right to accreditation of non-formal learning outcomes, in order to transfer and value them in formal learning pathways.

On a meso-economic level, organizations responsible for VPL are the same organisations that are responsible for managing VET, PET and Tertiary A sector (see the above mentioned legal framework). In VET/PET sectors the overall supervision and coordination of VPL procedures, as far as they are linked to a qualification process including the official validation of qualification profiles, standards and requirements, is managed by the Confederation. Actual implementation of VPL is a responsibility of the cantons with the social partners (Oda – *Organisationen der Arbeitswelt*) being in charge of defining profiles and requirements for each qualification and deciding whether or not to apply VPL procedures.

4 Furio Bednarz, ECAP, Lugano, 2014.

5 VET is Vocational Education & Training ; PET is Professional Education & Training.

6 http://www.admin.ch/ch/e/rs/c412_10.html

The tertiary sector is practically free in defining its own rules in this respect, on a case-to-case basis. More in general, VPL procedures give the task of deciding issuing of certificates or credits to Commissions representing sector-based social partners and Institutions. These are the same boards that are issuing certificates and diplomas at different levels. Private organizations that launched competence management systems defined their own rules for issuing certificates, normally involving their management board.

On a microeconomic level, as far as accompaniment to the learners is concerned, Cantons are responsible for assuring information and guidance, but accompaniment is left to individual decisions (applicants are free to decide whether use it or not). There's a great offer of accompaniment measures assured by professional coaches, trainers and tutors, VPL specialists, normally acting as private providers. Sometimes accompaniment is partially or totally financed by public authorities, in different forms (demand or supply oriented). A certain number of NGOs are active in accompaniment, mainly addressing specific target groups (such as migrants, disadvantaged groups, etc.). In general, however, accompaniment is not mandatory; according to the NGVPL the constitution of a personal dossier (phase 2 of VPL process) is under the responsibility of individuals, who can autonomously decide to claim for support or not. Beyond information and first advice, this support is normally provided by private actors (institutes, centres, etc.). Sometimes – at least considering VET qualifications - support is financed by Cantonal authorities and by Bilateral Funds managed by the social partners, considering HE accompaniment. Financing VPL is normally a responsibility of applicants.

As far as the threats for VPL are concerned, the following barriers have to be overcome. A rigid focus on structured and complex pathways (Quality Assurance) could hamper the Multidimensional VPL legitimation (Complexity discourage learners → traditional paths conceived as easier). Thinking VPL as an alternative to continuous vocational training. Marginality of VPL in the political debate

Nevertheless, there are many opportunities for VPL in Switzerland. We might underline the following points. There is a slow but stable growth, enlargement of educational sectors adopting VPL. We can notice a growing sensitivity, institutional engagement, implementation of existing legal frameworks. The point is to make validation visible. More information should be provided to potential users, also through NGOs and stakeholders. The idea would be to make implementation strategies multidimensional and more flexible. VPL should become a main component of a lifelong learning perspective (integration between formal and informal learning) with methodological and didactical innovation.

3.1.3 Slovenia⁷

On a macroeconomic level, there are three main acts that govern VPL in different areas of education: National Vocational Qualifications Act, Higher Education Act and Higher Vocational Education Act. The procedure of assessment and validation of national vocational qualifications is carried out in accordance with the National Vocational Qualifications Act.

The procedure of Validation of non-formal knowledge on the level of tertiary education is carried out by individual faculties or by individual higher vocational schools, in accordance with the Higher Education Act and on the basis of accepted criteria. The higher vocational schools carry out the procedure in accordance with the Higher Vocational Education Act and on the basis of accepted criteria (determined by the Common guidelines and standards in procedures for validation of previously acquired knowledge in higher vocational education).

In the year 2000, the National Vocational Qualifications Act (NVQA) was passed. With the acceptance of this act – which introduced a system which provides access to nationally recognized certificates, enabling validation of prior learning (certification system) – actually began the development of the

7 Sergji Gabršček and Metka Ursic, CPZ, Ljubljana, 2014.

VNIL. The NVQA regulates the procedures and bodies for the preparation and adoption of vocational standards and of catalogues of standards for professional knowledge and skills – which are developed on the basis of the vocational standards and determine the knowledge and skills required to acquire NVQs – and conditions and procedures for the acquisition of NVQs. It was first amended in 2006; in 2009 the novel of this act was passed. This novel is consequence of the results of the permanent evaluation of the system of NVQs, which is in charge of the Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training

On a meso-economic level, the responsibility for development and implementation of processes of validation of non-formal and informal learning is in hands of different institutions. The most important are the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport. The main development organization is the Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training. There are also other institutions with important roles, mainly on the operative level - the National Examinations Centre, chambers, enterprises/employers, the Employment Service of Slovenia (or local employment services), educational institutions, including universities, and trade unions.

The validation of non-formal knowledge on the level of tertiary education is carried out by individual faculties in accordance with the Higher Education Act and on the basis of accepted criteria or by individual higher vocational schools in accordance with the Higher Vocational Education Act and on the basis of accepted criteria (determined by the Common guidelines and standards in procedures for validation of previously acquired knowledge in higher vocational education). Until now the most in this field was done by the Faculty of Management Koper. As a member of the University of Primorska this faculty performs the validation of non-formal knowledge on the level of tertiary education in accordance with rules passed by the Senate of the University of Primorska in the year 2009 and which are also the newest rules of this kind in Slovenia. However, the newest regulation in the field of validation of non-formal and informal learning in Slovenia are the above mentioned “Common guidelines and standards in procedures for validation of previously acquired knowledge in higher vocational education”, passed by the Commission for accreditation of higher education study programmes in 2010.

On a microeconomic level, information for candidates in relation to VPL is provided mainly by institutions themselves, on their web pages. There is also word of mouth and information from candidates that already did it successfully. The information is accessible if the candidate is aware of this opportunity but there is no systematic approach for promotion of the approach and for awareness building. The main motivation for interest in VPL is the actual validation of prior learning to shorten the length of the studies or training. This is mostly interest of individuals while organisations tend to avoid this as it is additional burden to their routine. The institutional barriers to VPL address two dimensions, learning and working. In learning the main obstacle is the length of the process for validation, and lack of belief in results, while in working there is in particular the lower value of the acquired qualification using this route comparing to the formal education. An important issue is also that it is not recognised in the collective agreement (provided by trade unions) and automatically having a lower status. However, there are also some additional personal barriers: lack of awareness of VPL, lack of information, lack of confidence and lack of understanding of the process of VPL.

There are some threats on the VPL process, to be overcome. The social value of non-formal knowledge is low. The impact of the formal education sphere is too big. The validation of non-formal knowledge is not contained in collective agreements and doesn't have the same value as formal education and degrees together with a non-validation (of national vocational) qualifications by employers.

There are still many opportunities for VPL in Slovenia with the growth of the VPL in both VET and HE sectors. VPL becomes an opportunity and not a threat to formal education. Experiences of adult learners provide an added value to the teaching and learning process in educational institutions. The legal framework follows the development and enhances the validation of prior learning. The financing

of education doesn't discriminate between formal and non-formal/informal education. Validation and validation procedures become less complex and more flexible. The focus of validation moves from the validation of theoretical knowledge towards validation of competences.

3.1.4 Romania⁸

On a macroeconomic level, validation and validation of vocational competences acquired in non-informal and informal contexts are performed by the assessment centers authorized by the National Authority of Qualifications – Adult Professional Training (department) (NCQAPT) in accordance with the *Procedure of the assessment and certification of the competences acquired in non-formal and informal contexts (Procedure)*, approved through the Joint Order no. 4543/468/2004 of the Minister of Education, Research, Youth and Sport and of the Minister of Labor, Social Solidarity and Family, with subsequent modifications and completions (3329/81/2005).<http://www.anc.gov.ro>. However, such procedure is not yet formally implemented for access to higher education as well. The National Qualification Framework adopted in Nov. 2013 (H.G. 918/2013) is a good reference for implementing the VPL at all levels, but the National Authority for Qualification decided to limit the VPL only till 3rd NQF level. Thus occupations like “trainer” for instance, possible to get validated previously are now not possible, unless it is about a trainer till level 3 of qualification. Therefore, a lot of centres of validation of competences aimed for occupations related to higher education are now closed down. The National Authority for Qualification is coordinating the whole process, and also the occupational standards based on which the validation process can take place are listed on their webpage.

On a meso-economic level, National Authority of Qualifications offers counseling for the assessment centers. They are responsible for the (re)accreditation of each evaluation center, as well as for the accreditation of the evaluators of competences. On their webpage is the national register or the assessment centers, together with the occupations there are accredited for. Staff working in adult education institutions and assessors from the assessment centers guides the candidates-local level.

On a microeconomic level, the Law of education 1/2011 mention the possibility of VPL for upper levels of qualification. Therefore, universities, according with their willingness, and based on their autonomy, might try to implement such procedures. But such attempt might be only a bottom-up initiative, as formally such service is not foreseen for higher education. The recently elaborated methodologies of the ministry of education for implementing the Law of education, regarding career counseling and the one regarding integrated services for the disable persons cover the possibility of VPL as well (www.edu.ro) However, the VPL is not financially supported (no active measure of employment), and the procedures are sometimes too bureaucratic (see Sava/Crasovan/Siliman 2012). The lack of information about this possibility is also a serious barrier. It might be possible that the Law of volunteering (2014) stipulating the validation of voluntary work to increase the use of VPL as well, this being a helpful stipulation for the elderly people also, while striving to access to higher education, to labor market.

The VPL process has had a good development in Romania in the last 10 years, since it was implemented. But one can say that in the last two years, it is a slight decreasing, and the National Authority for Qualification pays a less attention to the further development of this experience than the former National Adult Training Board. Surprisingly, the adoption of the National Qualification Framework (2013), and the reunification of the national agencies within the National Authority for Qualification, meant to make a better connection between the different levels of qualification, did not lead to a higher use of VPL. Further legislation is needed in this respect, to ensure the use of this certification path for all levels of qualification. It is better to say “integration” of the different legislative stipulations, and their better articulation and clarification, as stipulations exists even in the Law of education (2011), but not detailed till the end. However, the awareness for VPL has been

8 Simona Sava, IREA, University of West Timisoara, Timisoara, 2014.

created in these 10 years, even more information is needed about this alternative path, and also further improvements of the methodologies for VPL, for increasing its quality and credibility. As a positive trend, the efforts for elaborating the national strategy for VPL, as well as the ex-ante evaluation and proposal for the 2014-2020 ESF programs are specifically including the stipulations for VPL, hoping therefore in the enlarged use. The universities also, step by step are increasingly aware and open to such solution, and small bottom up initiatives can be noticed, the ALLinHe project contributing to the slightly improved situation.

3.1.5 South Korea⁹

Although the Republic of Korea has Korea Qualification Framework (KFA, National Qualification Framework in Republic of Korea), VPL has not connected to KFA. Republic of Korea has yet established a nation-wide framework for VPL and legal basis, there is no visible policy and process related to VPL at work.

The National Institute for Lifelong Education (NILE) and the Korea National Open University (KNOU) are interested in applying the practices of VPL in higher education on a pilot basis.

In addition, some universities that have been involved in Lifelong Learning-Centered University, a government-sponsored project, have implemented VPL in order to offer an opportunity for the adult on a pilot basis. In 2011, 25 colleges and universities in order to be designated as a Lifelong Learning-Centered University and, eventually getting government funding declared that they would apply the notion and practices of VPL to their credit system. Among them, only three colleges and universities actually implemented the practices of VPL. The colleges and universities of Lifelong Learning-Centered University project are neither legally nor practically connected with KFA and any type of national authorities. Yet, there is no coordinating body which is responsible for launching and operating a nation-wide VPL system in Republic of Korea. In particular, while the government agencies and universities somewhat recognise the significance and practical use of VPL, other stakeholders such as trade unions, industries, and sector councils have shown little interest in VPL.

On a pilot study base, several universities are operating VPL for adult learners; their target groups vary. In case of Lifelong Learning-Centered University project, there are two tracks: a degree programme and a non-degree programme. While adult learners with secondary diploma and those who wish to obtain a second HE degree are eligible for a degree programme, females with career discontinuity, retirees, the elderly are eligible for a non-degree programme. For an individual learner, only an individual department at a college or university provides a limited information about VPL such as what they need to prepare for an oral interview and presentation and what kind of documents they have to hand it. Regarding Korean ALLinHE pilot study, we interviewed North Korean (NK) refugees in South Korea. As NK refugees have not brought any document that proves their educational attainment, South Korean government adopted a policy to validate their education from North Korea. It is by and large a summative-validation of formal education. There is no validation of non-formal and informal learning yet but we found reflective- and formative-validation of non-formal and informal learning are indeed a necessary instruments to empowering NK refugees.

Since the Ministry of Employment and Labour announced that VPL will be employed by the year of 2017, there is an increasing possibility that VPL will be implemented in Korea HE institutions. In addition, some researchers and government officials are well aware that, for successfully putting a pledge into effect, several critical issues must be addressed and clarified such as training VPL professional for supporting individual candidates, preparing relevant documents and application process, proving benefits from participating in VPL for individual learners, universities, industries and other stakeholders, sharing the cost for operating VPL.

⁹ Hae Young Lee, National Institute for Lifelong Education-NILE, Seoul & Dae Joong Kang, Seoul National University, 2014.

3.1.6 The Netherlands¹⁰

A national system for validation of non-formal and informal learning in the Netherlands started up 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.

On a macro-economic level, 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 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, transparency and to guarantee the summative effects by means of certification or qualification. The role of the Kenniscentrum EVC changed from the overall responsibility for all features of VPL to supporting the quality-focus. 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 VPL as a formalised instrument for Validation of Learning Outcomes linked to not only national qualifications but also too 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 is expected to be presented in early 2014 and should broaden validation opportunities 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. From 2013, the focus in the government's role is changing towards overseeing the quality of and access to VPL towards a system focusing on validating learning outcomes for three VPL-perspectives: VPL for formally validating a personal portfolio, without linking it directly to a national qualification standard; VPL for career steps on the labour market and access to non-formal training (sector standards) ; VPL for career steps aiming at formal learning (national qualifications) This broad focus on the formalised use of VPL entails a major change in the national strategy, since with this triple focus the balance of responsibilities in a multi-stakeholder involvement in VPL can differ, the learning objectives as supported by VPL can also differ and the outcome of VPL can have both a formal and non-formal learning impact (further learning). These three forms of VPL can be considered as different kinds of skills audits since they focus on the validation of prior - formal, non-formal and informal - learning outcomes for the reason of finding out if there is a possible link between a personal learning biography and a social-economic purpose in society. In the Netherlands it would be better to speak of a competences-audit since competences embrace both skills, knowledge and attitude, including ambition, as denominators.

On a meso-economic level, responsibilities are divided amongst a diversity of stakeholders. Firstly, the government focuses on the infrastructure and on the quality of VPL and the VPL system. The government stimulates the use of VPL with a communication campaign on the Ervaringscertificaat, a fiscal facility for VPL, the Kenniscentrum EVC, platforms with experts and companies, research and broadening the scope of VPL. With the exception of the fiscal facility, these tasks are shared with the social partners (the 'covenant-partners').

10 Ruud Duvekot, Inholland University, Rotterdam, 2014

Secondly, 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 VPL-systems for employees and job-seekers. 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 VPL.

Social partners stimulate the use of VPL through collective labour agreements. Employees have the right to VPL 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 VPL at their (sector) level. In most cases social partners, sector organisations and accredited VPL-providers are involved in setting up VPL-procedures.

Thirdly, 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 stimulate the use and the quality of the Ervaringscertificaat. The Foundation for Cooperation on Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market - Stichting Samenwerking Beroepsopleiding Bedrijfsleven (SBB) steers the agreements on the degree requirements of VET which are set out in qualification dossiers. 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 in to the ervaringscertificaat.

On a micro-economic level, a VPL-procedure in the Netherlands always contains more or less 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 making individual arrangements linked 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) ; VPL report: Description of results and accreditation (by the assessor), compared with the individual career goals, together with advice on further personal development in the direction of the individual 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 that match with the learning outcomes that are 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 a VPL 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 VPL 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-assessment (of and for learning), criterion-oriented interviews, observations, and other testing.

As a conclusion, on the basis of analysing the development of VPL in the Netherlands the following general conclusions can be drawn: VPL has everything to do with the use of the possibilities that

lifelong learning has to offer to individuals and organisations in the fields of employability and empowerment. Organising responsibilities in VPL is a crucial part in this: the individual is in charge of putting together and maintaining the portfolio. The portfolio is the basis for the formation of a lifelong learning strategy; the organisation is responsible for asking the organisation's competence questions and to facilitate investment in its own learning employees; the learning facilities (professional education, schooling and training) must be able to respond to the various learning needs of the learning individual, in other words be able to offer educational programmes that have been custom-made both structurally and in content.

There is support for the idea that the individual takes a central place in establishing, designing and implementing lifelong learning. This investment in human capital calls for co-makship of the learner him/herself. At all times the principle process here is the process of moving towards the desired learning goals, both when determining an individual's starting situation and during an individual's development course.

The portfolio is a powerful way to give structure and content to this co-makship. Guidance from within the labour market organisation could be a welcome push in this direction by offering: training in self-management of competencies. This is a useful way to start the formation of the desired 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. This could be of great use in determining goals and direction in lifelong learning.

In the light of the different goals needed to make a start in lifelong learning, further research is needed into the motives for and the desired design of lifelong learning strategies. The variety of lifelong learning models (educational, upgrade, HRD and career models) can then be taken up on the basis of their own dynamics, in which the three actors (see 1a, b, c) can deal with varying responsibilities.

VPL as a bridge between the individual/organisation and professional education/schooling only becomes relevant when concrete learning questions have been formulated, which then need to be answered by professional education/schooling. The basis for all learning questions is, after all, deciding what the starting situation of the individual is. In addition, on the basis of a specific learning question a lifelong learning trajectory is offered; this could be a diploma trajectory but could also be enrichment learning in the form of modules, action learning, distance education, work guidance or otherwise.

VPL may serve as a bridge between the competence needs of, on the one hand, the organisation and, on the other hand, the individual. This calls for two forms of VPL: Synchronizing competence systems of labour market organisations on the one hand, with their competence management or HRM, and on the other hand schools and institutes, with their competence-focused curricula and training programmes. The goal of this synchronization is to determine which competencies and learning environments can be added to the portfolio; in this way the portfolio of the working individual can be fed and upgraded from within the HRM and the (professional) educational and schooling system. This form of VPL is top-down oriented and strives for a harmony between competence systems in the areas of supply and demand.

Through this synchronisation the learner can make clearer choices with regards to enriching his/her portfolio. The appreciation and recognition the learning individual seeks (partially dependent on the goals that have been set) can then be supported by two competence systems. VPL can provide concrete indications of what the most appropriate learning route for personal development is. In doing so, they can also make use of the competence acquisition that can be supported from within the own organisation or through external organisations. This form of VPL is bottom-up oriented VPL and looks for the balance between personal development questions and the most appropriate learning content and design.

3.1.7 Finland¹¹

11 Harri Kerulainen, Eila Burns & Aino Lapanjuuri, Jyväskylä University of Applied Scienceez, Jyväskylä, Finland, 2014

On a macroeconomic level, the Finnish VPL system is connected to the European level development of Higher Education (HE) as well as national higher educational regulations. In legislation related to education VPL is understood as a learner's subjective right. These regulations take into account all students including diverse learners. Recommendations about implementation of VPL and efficient ways of recognizing prior learning when students move from further to higher education are in place. In addition, national and international good practices of VPL as well as recommendations for common principles are highlighted and disseminated

On a meso-economic level, in Finland, VPL practices exist within educational institutions i.e. schools, colleges and higher education institutions as a fixed part of educational system and curriculum. Each institution determines how VPL practices are implemented and who is responsible for them. VPL quality-assurance is connected with the quality system of educational organizations. General information about VPL and curriculum are available on universities' web sites, and it is also provided by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish Board of Education. Pedagogical management team of the university offers guidelines for VPL. Decisions relating to VPL are made by lecturers / tutors, in some universities also by student counsellors or head of programmes. These procedures are indicated in the University's Degree Regulation, and are assessed by universities quality management systems and student feedback practices. Amongst the latest developments and initiatives concerning VPL in Finnish HE has been understanding work as an element of the learning process.

On a microeconomic level, in Finnish HE organisations VPL processes underpin the idea that not only the learning experience itself but the outcomes, application and reflection of prior learning to professional life are even more important. All students have the right but no obligation to apply for VPL. The student may apply for accreditation of higher education studies completed elsewhere or competences he/she has acquired in other ways. Students have a possibility to discuss recognition of prior leaning with their tutors or student counsellors. Support is provided by lecturers/tutors and student counselors at the educational institutions. Considering the target groups (SEN and 50+) three important elements were noticed. Firstly, tutors should be able to allocate enough time for personal guidance and discussions to help students to recognize their skills and competences as well as areas of learning that they find challenging. Secondly, special attention should be paid to inclusive pedagogy. Teaching and learning should be student-centered and relevant to adult learners. Thirdly, the VPL process in itself should be clear and straight forward to both tutors and students.

As a conclusion, the VPL system as a whole poses great challenges for higher educational institutions, pedagogical solutions and individuals. It requires particular flexibility from educational providers at the time when resources are already scarce. It is important to develop modules into which the VPL system is incorporated and make sure that these are up-to-date in order to guarantee a high quality VPL system. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that the approach, idea, tools and methods of VPL are important elements in student guidance systems. It is also useful to think about the steps of the learning process more widely.

The same principles should be applied to all students; VPL methods and procedures are likely to be as suitable for all learners as they should be for all target groups. The successes or failures of these groups can offer insights into where VPL as a whole stands. Amongst the latest developments and initiatives concerning VPL in Finnish HE has been understanding work as an element of the learning process. In addition, co-operation with educational and work organizations will be important in relation to VPL in where skills and competences are highlighted not the VPL process itself.

3.1.8 Denmark¹²

¹² Kirsten Aagaard, Ellen Enggaard & Hakon Grunnet, NVR, Aarhus, 2014.

On a macroeconomic level, the validation of non-formal and informal learning has been on the policy agenda in Denmark in about 20 years. The key legislation on validation of prior learning in Denmark is Act no. 556 of 6 June 2007, entitled "Development of the recognition of prior learning in adult education and continuing training" (Udbygning af anerkendelse af realkompetence på voksen og efteruddannelsesområdet mv.). The legislation has been effective from 1 August 2007.

The legislation gives each individual (from 18 or 25 years depending of the educational field), the right to have his/her prior learning experiences validated in relation to specific goals of adult education and continuing training. It focuses on the needs of the individual and aims to make the process as accessible and flexible as possible. Developing practice in validation takes time. The key points for strengthening the effort are: Further developing the use of RKV/IKV at the educational institutions / VEU centers (adult education and training) ; Making the recognition of prior learning a task for relevant stakeholders: companies, job centers, unemployment funds, trade unions, educational guidance offices, third sector ; Creating a holistic approach

Supporting the effort to strengthen the recognition of prior learning and making the effort more visible
Strengthening the co-operation between central stakeholders in the work relating to RKV, i.e. educational institutions, job centers, unemployment funds, trade unions, third sector etc. ; Working for a cohesive perspective for education, jobs and employment ; Improving the quality and the professionalism of the work for recognition of prior learning ; Contributing to the overall awareness and development of concepts and understanding in theory and in practice ; Supporting development initiatives related to ordinary educational activities.

On a meso-economic level, validation is developed in an interlinked process within a top-down approach and a bottom-up approach. Great differences still remain between the educational institutions with regards to their level of activity. Some institutions are very active, others to a lesser extent. Different circumstances influence how each individual institution treats the subject of validation. It is the educational institution which is responsible for conducting prior learning assessment on the basis of the educational standards, admission requirements and competence objectives against which the candidate wishes to be evaluated. After identifying one or more study objectives or admission requirements against which a candidate is to be evaluated, the educational institution is responsible for the specific counseling and guidance relating to the process of prior learning assessment. Other bodies can be in charge of information, identification, guidance and counselling, in a broader perspective, in the phase leading up to the assessment process ("the pre-phase"). These include trade unions, employers' associations, job centres, unemployment insurance funds, civic education institutions, study committees and "eVejledning" (online guidance service), who can all take care of this part of the process and often in collaboration with the educational institution. Focus in the "pre-phase" is on establishing objectives, identifying needs, direction and wishes. Among other things, companies can do so by defining new tasks and future business plans with matching competence profiles. For individuals, both employees and jobseekers, this part of the process may include documentation of what they have previously learnt. For both companies and individuals, the pre-phase helps clarify and identify objectives and the direction for career development, and it helps create a potential plan for the types of formal education which would be relevant in future. If, in "the pre-phase", a need for formal education is identified, and the individual candidate possesses knowledge, skills and competencies within the area concerned, without having any documentation to the fact, prior learning assessment may be relevant. In the processes of documentation and assessment at the educational institutions, the documentation work is narrowed against the specific educational objectives and requirements. Both the applicant and the educational institution contribute to the documentation process. According to Danish law, the assessment must be conducted solely by the educational institution offering the study programmes to which a specific assessment is related.

On a microeconomic level, educational institutions are obliged to inform the public about recognition of prior learning on their websites. But there is still an inadequate level of information about the possibilities of validation of non-formal and informal learning in Denmark and too many people are not

aware of the opportunities available to them. This is an issue that needs to be addressed by the Government, social partners and stakeholders. A counseling web portal provides general information about prior learning (www.ug.dk). The guidance institutions provide information, support clarification and documentation concerning the validation process, and provide guidance to the individual about choice of further learning and career. In the fall of 2012, the Danish Ministry of Education launched an information campaign on prior learning assessments (RKV). The purpose of this campaign was to increase the awareness of and promote the use of RKV. The campaign was carried out by the VEU centers at the local level. Both online and offline platforms were used to communicate the campaign's messages. The idea behind using different online platforms was to increase the visibility of the campaign and to generate traffic to the websites of the VEU centers. The campaign had a positive effect and improved the awareness of the potential of RKV considerably.

As a conclusion, the SWOT analysis applied to VPL in Denmark could be synthesized as follows.

As far as strengths are concerned: widening access to education and learning and a method for competence development; value for the society, organisations and individuals. Improving opportunities for employability and empowerment.

As far as opportunities are concerned: a more demand-led labour market; a more flexible and tailor made learning culture; a lifelong learning approach to optimise different forms of learning ; To value VPL in respect to society, organisations and individuals.

As far as weaknesses are concerned: VPL is not economical sustainable; VPL is time-consuming; Competences for VPL staff need to be developed; the collaboration between stakeholders is weak. The VPL in practice is not yet standardized; the collaboration between educational institutions to build common methods is weak. VPL is still relatively unknown by stakeholders and individuals.

As far as threats are concerned: the economic investment in VPL is reduced because of the economic crisis; the need for competence developments is not a priority ;collaboration and synchronizing competence systems in different organisations and educational systems are not developed.

3.1.9 United Kingdom¹³

On a macroeconomic level, the population of the UK is around 63 million, with 53 million people (84%) living in England. The 126 universities in the UK are divided among its four countries: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; some laws are shared across all four countries, while some differ from country to country and education policy is largely devolved to each of the four countries. Whilst the UK was one of the original countries that signed the Bologna Declaration in 1999, many universities have not fully aligned their practices to the Bologna process; the terms 'Accrediting Prior Learning' (APL) and 'Accrediting Prior Experience and Learning' (APEL) tend to be the terms used, rather than VPL. Students who do not gain enough qualifications at school for HE entry can enter HE through Access to Higher Education courses. In the UK, aspects of VPL are influenced and affected by the dialogue and legislation surrounding inclusion, diversity and equality. Nevertheless, current education policy in England is highly regressive, being subject to neo-conservative influence.

For the ALLinHE project, 8 representative Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were sampled and a synthesis of the UK legal, cultural and policy framework relevant to VPL suggests that all HEIs adhere to anti-discrimination law and policy used to protect people from discrimination, but they do not all refer explicitly to specific laws in their policy documentation (for example, Equality Act 2010, Data Protection Act 1998). Nevertheless, all HEIs have plans in place and they act to promote equality and diversity policy and legislation and to protect diverse groups of people whom the legislation is designed to protect. All sampled HEIs have procedures in place to check legal compliance at management level in regard to the legal framework on VPL.

¹³ Jane Murray, University of Northampton, Northampton, 2014.

A government paper issued by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills in 2011 stated an intention to put 'Students at the Heart of the System', yet student fees have tripled in England since the release of the paper and socio-economic disparity in England is widening at an alarming rate.

On a meso-economic level, VPL tends to be administered in a top-down, rather than bottom-up manner in UK HEIs but the nature of that administration is otherwise variable. Institutions require data from candidates, though the precise nature of the evidence that students must submit is highly variable, according to individual institutions. Nevertheless, most HEIs want data that are current, valid, authentic, sufficient to cover the learning outcomes of a unit/units or parts of these and relevant to the module for which the candidate seeks VPL. Responsibility for the management of VPL varies between HEIs, for example, it may be an Admissions Policy committee, a student and academic services department, a university accreditation board, the programme leader and admissions tutor or the faculty management team. Equally, each HEI designates different groups or individuals to make the decision to award VPL; these vary between an accreditation panel comprising programme leaders, a Head of Department, and a committee of an APL tutor with an Admissions team. Support and guidance for candidates seeking VPL also varies across HEIs in the UK. Whilst one HEI has a specified APEL champion who advises, mentors students producing portfolios, supports the assessment and validation process, sits on the APL Sub-group and provides training for students in the process, this is rare. All institutions provide some support in online form and most additionally provide student advisors or programme leaders and teams assume the support role for VPL. Admissions Appeals processes are generally available for appeals, and in some cases, candidates can resubmit their evidence and request for VPL.

On a microeconomic level, the UK target groups were 50+ and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND). Among the 50+ group, the main motivation for interest in VPL was personal development; the most significant institutional barrier to VPL was that some HEIs do not transfer qualifications and experience between disciplines but personal barriers were highly variable, according to individuals. Most 50+ candidates identified that their best source of support when making applications for VPL is the HEI though none in this group saw themselves as an independent, strong, co-producer in the VPL process, possibly because the HEI holds greater power in the UK. Whilst there was no evidence of cost incurred by individuals in the VPL process, successes reported by the 50+ group for VPL were highly variable. They included: release from study time, fulfilment of ambition and access to HE for non-traditional students. Among the SEND group, the main motivation for interest in VPL was the need for recognition, especially in a regulated activity such as teaching or social work. For this group, institutional barriers to VPL included the HEI's weak retention of support staff, poor employability post-university and lack of access to support services in the HEI. Personal barriers to HEI were highly variable, according to individuals. Only one respondent in this group saw herself as an independent, strong, co-producer in the VPL process, again, possibly because the HEI holds greater power in the UK. Similarly to the 50+ group, for the SEND group, there was no evidence of cost incurred by individuals in the VPL process. Successes reported by the 50+ group for VPL were different for individuals but a few patterns emerged: VPL may enable a SEND student to complete a nationally recognised degree and make a career move, give access to specialist support tutors for academic and moral support, lead to additional time to complete and submit assignments and complete tasks and may provide access to a laptop and software.

As a conclusion, England is one of four countries that comprise the UK. The four countries adopt different approaches to their education policies but England's population is the most significant, at around 84% of the UK population as a whole. English policy indicates that England is keen to promote higher education with the student at its heart, yet in practice, unlike the other UK countries and most EU countries, England has seen student fees increase threefold since 2012. Moreover, England is a country where socio-economic disparity dominates and this is on an upward trajectory. Alongside this context, the UK signed up to the Bologna Declaration in 1999, but many of its universities have never

fully aligned their practices to the Bologna process. Equally, while UK HEIs employ managers to assure legislative compliance with regard to equal opportunities, in regard to VPL per se, individual HEIs tend to retain considerable autonomy in decision-making, supporting and managing the process, which makes transparency difficult: in other words, the UK VPL model is decidedly top-down. In the current policy context, it is difficult to see how a bottom-up model may emerge change in the next decade, particularly in England where education policy is currently highly regressive and influenced by neo-conservatism. All of this indicates that rather than a move towards increased VPL as part of an expanding learning society, in England – the most populated country of the UK - we are likely to see a narrowing of HE participation, and if this continues, potentially a return to elitism.

3.2 Case-studies

Several case-studies¹⁴ also shine their light on the many ways VPL can and/or needs to operate in case of a multi-targeted VPL-approach. In these cases the link with the four models for lifelong learning strategies becomes clear. The target groups of the *ALLinHE*-project were and are central in these cases: 50+ employees, migrants and special needs groups.

3.2.1 Rockwool, the Netherlands

The Rockwool Group in the Netherlands is the world's leading supplier of innovative products and systems based on stone wool. This case offers a good example of the HRD-model, using also the benefits of the Educational model.

Since the 1990s learning is a key element in the human resource management-policy of Rockwool. In the plant in the Netherlands this HRM-policy can be regarded as an on-going 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.
- VPL 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 April 11, 2014 Rockwool was awarded in Rotterdam, the Netherlands at the 1st Global VPL Biennale the International Prize 2014 for Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning. (www.vplbiennale.com).

3.2.2 Immigrant women, Switzerland

An interesting Swiss case on multidimensional and multi-target approaches to VPL (Bednarz & Bednarz, 2014a) focused on the group of HE-qualified immigrant women, having difficulties in valuing their prior learning and competences in the local job market. The case analyzed three different aims addressed by activating an VPL path: *individual empowerment*, through the self-recognition of competences, as a means for better planning redeployment and spend one's own skills and competences in the job market; *access to lifelong learning*, through the valuation of prior learning as a means for overcoming barriers and reducing the duration of a formal tertiary education path; and finally *access to an official qualification*, as a means for achieving visibility and accountability of skills and competences via recognition and Recognition of informal and non-formal learning. Different RPL modes, often coexisting ones, could be identified in practices focused on:

14 The cases came from the project partner's research in the *ALLinHE*-project and cover new and existing cases.

- *reflective VPL* comes always to the fore, as far as the reflective elaboration of life, work and learning biographies of individuals is the basis for building up personal portfolios and for designing action plans
- *formative VPL*, enables learners decide what/where/how to spend their prior learning, both for valuing it in the job market, for further developing their profiles or formulating a career-step with the portfolio as a starting point
- *summative VPL* finally plays a central function, both in access to lifelong learning and to a qualification, where personal portfolios are built up against pre-set standards, looking for an official diploma or for exemptions.

This Swiss case shows to which extent heterogeneity is the key word explaining how VPL actually works, confirming therefore the usefulness of multidimensional and multi-target approaches. Goals of VPL-users largely depend on the kind of VPL targets (empowerment, recognition, certification), as well as from the positioning of the persons in the life cycle, by their biographical background and professional identity. Local learning cultures and traditions also play a fundamental role. Diverse dimensions and VPL modes appear to be integrated, and should be considered under the lens of crosscutting links: between personal and professional goals, formative and summative meanings of VPL, roles of education, training and experience in formal and informal learning settings, targets of empowerment (individual), social and institutional recognition.

3.2.3 IVC, the Netherlands

The International Women's Centre (IVC) in Den Helder, the Netherlands provides an, almost identical to the Swiss, example of the lifelong learning model (www.int-vrouwencentrum.nl).

VPL at the IVC aims at contributing to the emancipation, participation and integration of migrant women in the Netherlands. One of the activities of the IVC is a training for self-management of competences. The aim is to teach the 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. During the training the awareness of their personal values is strengthened.

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 VPL-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 competences.

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 program at a VET-school or university.

3.2.4 Knowledge Centre Mid-West, Denmark

A Danish case study focused on the Knowledge Centre Mid-West (Ecotec, 2007). The main focus of this Centre was to bring competence assessment into real life conditions and assess skills and competences in the workplace, where the competences can be demonstrated and where they are normally used.

The main reasons for such a choice were: the fact that the vast majority of the target group (immigrants) did not have any previous work experience and the view that the best way to assess a person's skills was to do that in the workplace. Moreover, since most of the immigrants did not have any previous education, assessment by educational institutions was not considered to be as relevant as an assessment by companies. In this sense this is a case in which the HRD model is very functional with both the Educational as well as the Upgrade model supporting the success of VPL for the target group.

The unemployed immigrants are supported by consultants at the job centers for a workplace competence assessment. After the assessment period is finished, the immigrant is issued with a 'competence card', which describes actual competences as they are observed. The competence card can be used as a recommendation when looking for another job (or being recommended by a job consultant to on-the-job training).

Assessment, through observation, is carried out in the workplace by a mentor. The process is facilitated by an online tool, which specifies which skills and competences are to be assessed for a particular job. The tool contains descriptions for each job and specifies the range of skills that ensure proper execution of tasks envisaged by a given job function. The development of standards was based on the existing national occupational standards. However, the process of constructing job descriptions went further by breaking down the skills and competences into functions.

During the three to four week assessment period, personal competences, professional, language, computer and basic skills are assessed in relation to the tasks performed. The reasons for prioritizing these competences was the fact that the employers often perceive immigrant workers as lacking key personal competences needed in a Danish workplace.

Due to the initial low or no level of education of the target groups, the types of jobs that are performed are those corresponding to an unskilled labour level, such as cleaner. In some cases, the skills acquired can correspond to qualification levels and are usually complemented by vocational training in an education institution. Whenever the qualification serves the purpose of getting a person into employment, this option is chosen. This is especially relevant to the social services sector where the demand for labour, especially at lower skill levels, is high and offers a very effective bridge into employment for immigrants.

During the assessment period the employers can be compensated with a wage subsidy for a learner. In many cases learners are offered further training in the company, where companies can benefit from training subsidies and a learner is paid a minimum wage for their work.

The system is also useful for other target groups which lack proper professional experience. It receives considerable support from employers who are, first of all keen to take on new trainees and secondly, satisfied with the new standardized tools that minimize their time spent on giving feedback while at the same time allowing for comparability of the assessment results.

3.2.5 Koskisen Oy, Finland

In Finland, Koskisen Oy has been developing training and assessment methods in order to recognise and, at the same time, broaden the skill levels of its employees since the early 1990s. Their initiative has not only benefited the employees and the company itself but it has had a wider impact on the industry sector. This is a case (Ecotec, 2007) that shows how the lifelong learning model works in the context of profit-sectors. This is absolutely the case for the company itself. For the employees, employability was their primary target to be reached with the assistance of qualifications. But in the end, it turned out to be more a kind of an empowerment strategy for the employees since VPL helped them to learn and work on the basis of their own strengths and talents.

Koskisen Oy is a manufacturing company in the field of wood production. During the past 10 years some 400 employees (approx. 37% of all employees) have been able to validate the skills and the learning they have acquired at work and have obtained an official qualification.

The company offers 'in-house' training, which together with work experience provides employees with an opportunity to attain one of a range of nationally recognised competence-based qualifications (e.g. various wood production and management qualifications).

The skills are assessed by a team that consists of an external assessor and employer and employee representatives. The assessment is made up of practical and written skills tests. All the participants are required to possess 1-2 years of work experience.

The validation and certification has had significant individual, company and industry level effects, both for the employees as well as for the company.

3.2.6 Welfare sector, the Netherlands

The Welfare sector in the Netherlands finally provides a good example of VPL embedded in the HRD-model on sector-level, using the educational model for standard setting. In 2011-2012 a pilot project on VPL 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 an 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 APL-procedure as part of the intake for a qualification-programme (incl. portfolio and assessment). The aim of this evaluation is to either obtain directly the HE-qualification that is linked to the sector-standard for senior group leader or 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 VPL-procedure was managed by an VPL-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 also 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 validation in higher professional education qualifications for experienced youth workers. Furthermore, 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 come to your best).

3.2.7 Marginalised groups, United Kingdom

A UK case study on VPL for marginalised groups [students with 'special education needs (SEN)' and students aged 50-plus] (a, 2014) is an example of the educational model. The UK picture of VPL supporting access to HE is varied. Policy, practice and culture affect VPL at a national level and HE institutes view their own VPL provision, policy and practice positively.

The majority of individuals in the UK case study were able to report at least some level of success in regard to VPL. The data indicate two major focus points where VPL is applied at least some of the time in the UK HE institutes, resulting in some satisfaction for individuals: prior learning or experience reducing or eliminating entry requirements and allowances during the programme to ease individuals' progress through the degree.

The case study indicates that once equality legislation is accounted for, the UK government tends to devolve many of the VPL processes relating to access to HE to HE institutes. Whilst aspects of the VPL processes are evident in most HE institutes, there is a lack of consistency and transparency so that individuals attempting to access HE often find it difficult to navigate their way through the VPL processes. In regard to access to HE and VPL processes, an unequal power relationship exists between HE institutes and individuals, weighted towards HE institutes; this especially disadvantages marginalised groups who are likely to be in the greatest need of access to VPL processes in order to access HE.

3.2.8 Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences, Finland

The case of Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences in Finland (Lepänjuuri & Burns, 2014a) provides insights that addressing learning needs of learners in special education needs (SEN) and 50-plus groups and applying VPL in HE can be challenging. It sets an example of the educational model in which VPL is both used for summative as well as for reflective purposes.

In particular applying VPL approaches to learners in the SEN group seemed difficult. This was due to them having had difficulties in the past which had led to patchy educational backgrounds and employment histories. It cannot be stressed enough that paying attention to guidance and inclusive pedagogical practices that value diverse ways of learning enhances everybody's learning but more so with these kinds of learners. Students with SEN may not always have a clear idea about their own learning needs and competences, and therefore discussions about individual strengths and abilities may offer a way to think of alternative ways to learn in HE. Dialogues and discussions with the tutor seem to be effective methods and, therefore, they should be used throughout the studies. This kind of approach puts students at the centre of learning and encourages them to reflect on their individual needs and competences more deeply.

However, the VPL system as a whole poses great challenges for HE institutes, pedagogical solutions and individuals. It requires particular flexibility from educational providers at the time when resources are already scarce. It is important to develop modules into which the VPL system is incorporated and make sure that these are up-to-date in order to guarantee a high quality VPL system. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that the approach, idea, tools and methods of VPL are important elements in student guidance systems.

It is also useful to think about the steps of the learning process more widely. This case describes this as follows: *"[Generally in education] it would be important to bring forward diverse types of learners and test, discuss and bring up alternative ways of learning. That is to say that teachers and students should consider together what the best way to learn is. Learning new things shouldn't be too difficult at beginning or otherwise one might give up. Clarifying things that's unclear; re-doing, recapping and practical application are important parts of the learning process. It would be good to gain positive experiences along the way."* (ibidem, p. 188).

The same principles should be applied to all students; VPL methods and procedures are likely to be as suitable for all learners as they should be for SEN and 50+ groups. The successes or failures of these two special groups can offer insights into where VPL as a whole stands.

3.2.9 National learning culture, South Korea

The National Institute for Lifelong Education (NILE) in South Korea provides insight in the learning culture of South Korea in which the further development of VPL could go well together with the present reforms in vocational (higher) qualifications systems (Lee and Ko, 2014a). The gap in South Korea between the labour market and HE creates societal instability and unemployment and ironically, this enhances a skills mismatch that forces young people to seek more education and forces employers to invest more in job training for new recruits. The links amongst vocational (higher) education, the labour market and industry could be strengthened in South Korea. It is known that the learning culture of a country determines strongly how RPL/VPL is conceived and operated (Duvekot et al., 2005). The learning culture of South Korea is in this respect predominantly perceived as a model of social selection.

Experts believe that the reform of vocational qualifications systems such as the National Competency Standards (NCS) and the National Qualification Framework might play a critical role in adopting VPL. However, with respect to this reform several issues require attention such as the modularisation of learning programmes/courses comparable to NCS, the development of learning outcomes-based curricula and assessment tools and the development of a transfer system amongst NCS-based academic programmes/courses and the Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS).

The ACBS of South Korea is a multifaceted system: it serves to help learners progressing toward higher education, assessing various types of learning experiences, and acquiring vocational qualifications and

HE degrees. The ACBS is a key policy of lifelong education that allows any learner to obtain, accumulate, and transfer HE-level credits. The ACBS is an open system in constant evolution. The driving forces for the evolution have been derived from various roots. For instance, stakeholders with different purposes and interests exist for the evolution of the ACBS. The following are the several features and benefits using the ACBS associated with various stakeholders (Grubb et al., 2006; NILE, 2013).

First of all, traditional HEIs of South Korea have established on- and off-campus, and online lifelong education centres that function separately within their offer. HEIs, as VET providers, have offered various programmes for traditional and non-traditional learners. These campus-based lifelong education centres for non-traditional students should be accredited by NILE to be part of the ACBS. Once accredited, an HEI becomes more flexible in assessing and recognising both academic and non-academic experiences from various sources. In addition, the ACBS has helped HEIs to induct credit accumulation and transfer system for non-academic experiences into a HE area. For traditional HEIs, the connection with the ACBS is regarded as an instrument to open to non-traditional learners and to change their academic-oriented curriculum. Moreover, the ACBS has had an influence on modifying the practices of education, assessment, and entrance requirements, and recognising non-formal and informal learning outputs that the adult learners possess. At a local level, the ACBS also helps local governments expand the accessibility to the HE for local constituents. Once a Local Lifelong Learning Centre established by local governments is accredited by the ACBS, it becomes part of the HE system.

Secondly, South Korean government departments, including the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Employment and Labour have recently put pressure on traditional universities. Traditional HE institutions are being asked to change their structure and policies so as to embrace labour market relevance, lifelong learning orientation, and greater accessibility. Since 2013, the newly formed government has asked HEIs to transform their academic-oriented curricula to the NCS-based models. As the ACBS system is currently the only experienced system in terms of recognising non-formal and informal learning, it serves as the only system for the South Korean governments to pursue quality assurance and monitoring the implementation of NCS including RPL/VPL.

Third, a VET provider accredited by the ACBS awards a HE degree. A VET provider offers programmes usually relevant for the demands of labour market. In order to be accredited, a VET provider should follow the Curriculum Standards set by the ACBS. From 2014, the South Korean government initiates an incentive that an accredited VET provider adopting NCS on its curriculum might be eligible for public funding such as the Employment Insurance Fund.

Fourth, an employer or a firm may be a key stakeholder in the ACBS system. A firm may want its in-built training programmes to be accredited by the ACBS. With its programmes accredited, a firm can make a step towards its employees obtaining HE degrees through its own firm-specific training programmes, alongside vocational qualifications. By linking a firm-specific training programme to the HE system, the ACBS plays a role in establishing a bridge between the outputs of a competence-oriented training, on-site/non-formal learning and a formal HE system.

Last but not least, the ACBS is a part of lifelong education policy and also a part of the HE system in South Korea. An individual learner views the ACBS as a second chance to further his/her study at HE level or to obtain a vocational qualification. To an adult learner, the ACBS might seem attractive, since it has no rigid pre-requisite for admission, it is flexible in terms of time management and credits for a semester, and it offers chances to pursue career development as well as a HE degree at the same time. It is also easier for learners to change their speciality or major, which would be difficult in a traditional HE institution. It is important to note that, by law, a learner is not allowed to enrol in the ACBS and a traditional HE institution at the same time. A traditional HE institution only accepts a certain number of the credits that an individual learner has obtained in the ACBS (Grubb et al., 2006).

3.2.10 Workshops for migrants at the Cité des Métiers, iriv (since 2012)- Supporting migrants in the process of VPL –

A main added value of the Allinhe project is to “open doors” and to take into account special profiles and expectations of VPL candidates. The “open door” strategy is to be understood in many ways. Combining the top-down approach (EU and States providing legislation and financial support for VPL) and the bottom-up approach (individuals and organisations willing to be better supported for the access to Higher Education and proposing tools & methods to do so) may be a challenging one.

The diversity of the national legislation on VPL, together with the diverse profiles of VPL councillors and various expectations of VPL candidates are main issues to be taken into consideration if we really want to promote an “open door” approach. At any level many obstacles may be raised. On a macro-level, there might be a misunderstanding on the VPL framework combined with a difficult access to VPL information. On a meso-level, professionals working with publics with special needs (50+, migrants, disabled people) are most of the time not connected with VPL councillors. This lack of connection might be a main obstacle to make VPL be accessible. On a micro-level, public with special needs are not properly informed according to their testimonies: the information exists but they don't feel concerned by the VPL device because they think they are too old (50+), other devices are offered to them (disabled people) or they thought the VPL process was designed for nationals (migrants).

Equality of chance to have an access to VPL, whatever the age, the profile, the professional or social background could be a challenging goal, in Europe, for the ten years to come. There are many ways to achieve this challenge. Involving of the actors at all level (macro, meso and micro levels) is a main issue. Enhancing transparency is another crucial issue as information seem to be differently understood depending on who is explaining the VPL process: institutional speech focussed on the general framework (general principle) on a macro-level, technical speech focussed on the different steps to go through (process) on a meso-level, personal speech focused on the many barriers to overcome (sometimes deception compare to the original hope) on a micro-level.

As far as France is concerned, since 2012, a concrete support to be informed and to understand the VPL process has been provided to migrants and councillors by the Institute for Research and Information on Volunteering (iriv) in partnership with the Cité des Métiers in Paris. Monthly workshops are offered to migrant publics whatever their country of origin, qualification or gender. The learning process combines a macro-level, a meso-level and a micro-level approach. As far as the macro-level is concerned, the 2002 law, setting the VPL process in France (access to a diploma or certification on the basis of a professional experience combining paid, unpaid and voluntary work) is explained. The idea is to make the migrant publics understand that this is not a national process but a “universal” process (open to anyone living in France). For the meso-level approach, the main organisations in charge of VPL in France are explained with a focus on the National Commission in charge of implementing a national repertory with all the diploma and qualification accessible through VPL (CNCP). In complement, potential VPL candidates are given some explanation on the organisations in charge of supporting them on the ground: either to finance their VPL process (regional councils), or to prepare them to fill the required documents (training bodies) or to make them pass the exam (organisations habilitated to deliver diploma or certification). As far as the micro-level is concerned, a special tool is explained to the participants at the workshops : a portfolio implemented in the framework of a previous European project (Migrapass portfolio). This tool is useful to prepare the VPL file they will have to fill as the portfolio integrates the identification of the experience (paid, unpaid, voluntary), the expression of this experience in terms of competences (on the basis of 12 selected competences, together with a self-evaluation of the achieved level of competence) and the action plan to be offered (direct access to the labour market, training for assessing competences or VPL process when a diploma or qualification is needed to work).

3.2.12 Conclusion on the cases

These examples show that large groups from very different contexts and with different objectives can use Validating Learning. The bottleneck for making use of Validating Learning is less the knowledge infrastructure or organizations and more the individual's unfamiliarity with Validating Learning. This means that it is primarily the transition to individual empowerment that is causing the present underutilization of Validating Learning as gateway to employability and lifelong learning strategies of social partners and schools/institutes. Additionally, the examples show that the reason for this does not by definition lie in authority relationships. The individual is given adequate leeway to arrange a personal track with the individual learning biography, even if that lies outside the individual's own professional column. This stimulation of the learner offers opportunities for capacitation at sector levels since it's at the level of the work environment where learning strategies come to full bloom, both in terms of looking backwards into a learner's biography as well as forward when formulating further learning tasks for employees. The sector level is best situated to enhance this since the sector has the best view of the organisation's needs of capacitation within the sector and the network with learner providers for linking the worker's prior learning to efficient, further learning strategies. The sector reveals itself in this way as *the bridge builder* between learner and organisation by stimulating VPL-enhanced learning strategies.

4. Towards a roadmap for practising VPL

When answering the question 'What to do when implementing VPL in a specific context, on an individual level with linkages to sector/national levels?', it becomes apparent that much work still has to be done, both on the levels of policy-making and research as well as in communicating and practising the value of VPL for any target group in society. Both conclusions and critical success factors regarding the implementation of VPL-systematics from a personalized perspective in a sector/national context, as well as a roadmap for using general guidelines for this purpose, are offered in this synthesis of the *ALLinHE*-project.

VPL means that any organisation on sector and national levels acquire a clear picture of their competency demands and requirements, work on the formulation of their demand, and invest in their 'human capital'. For the learning system VPL means acting as a 'listening' partner, initiating and offering VPL *and* custom work. The learner has to prepare/be prepared to explore, identify and develop his or her personal competences so that he or she can work proactively on enhancing personal empowerment and development, employability and further career development. VPL and custom work are outstanding tools with which the individual can attain this enhancement.

4.1 Conclusions

In order to be able to recognise the developments regarding VPL within the transitional society and within the variety of goals and contexts more clearly, four different VPL-steered models for lifelong learning strategies were introduced. On the basis of these models the following general conclusions can be drawn:

1. VPL has everything to do with the use of the possibilities that lifelong learning has to offer individuals and organisations in the fields of employability and empowerment. Organising the 'Learner' him- or herself as well is a crucial part in this:
 - a. the learner is in charge of putting together and maintaining the portfolio. The portfolio is the basis for the formation of a lifelong learning strategy;
 - b. the sector/organisation is responsible for formulating the organisation's competence need and to facilitate investment in its *learning* employees;

- c. the learning facilitators (professional education, schooling and training) must be able to respond to the various learning needs of the learning individual, in other words be able to offer educational programmes that have been custom-made both structurally and in content.
- 2. There is support for the idea that the learner takes a central place in establishing, designing and implementing lifelong learning. This investment in human capital calls for co-designing responsibilities of the learner him/herself. At all times the principle process here is the process of moving towards the desired learning goals, both when determining an individual's starting situation and during an individual's development course.
- 3. The portfolio is a powerful way to give structure and content to this co-design. Guidance from within the sector and companies could be a welcome push in this direction by offering:
 - a. training in self-management of competences. This is a useful way to start the formation of the desired portfolio
 - b. 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.
 - c. self-assessment tools, for instance, to help determine the competence and ambition level. This could be of great use in determining goals and direction in lifelong learning.
- 4. In the light of the different goals needed to make a start in lifelong learning, further research is needed into the motives for and the desired design of lifelong learning strategies. The four models (educational, upgrade, HRD and lifelong learning) can then be taken up on the basis of their own dynamics in the dialogues between learner sector/organisation and learning facilitators, in which the three actors can deal with their varying responsibilities.
- 5. VPL as a bridge between the individual/organisation and professional education/schooling only becomes relevant when concrete learning questions have been formulated, which then need to be answered by professional education/schooling. The basis for all learning questions is, after all, deciding what the starting situation of the individual is. In addition, on the basis of a specific learning question a lifelong learning trajectory is offered; this could be a diploma trajectory but could also be enrichment learning in the form of modules, action learning, distance education, work guidance or otherwise.
- 6. VPL may serve as a bridge between the competence needs of, on the one hand, the organisation and, on the other, the individual. This calls for two forms of VPL:
 - a. Synchronizing competence systems of labour market organisations on the one hand, with their competence management or HRM, and on the other hand schools and institutes, with their competence-focused curricula and training programmes. The goal of this synchronization is to determine which competences and learning environments can be added to the portfolio; in this way the portfolio of the working individual can be fed and upgraded from within the HRM and the (professional) educational and schooling system. This form of VPL is top-down oriented and strives for a harmony between competence systems in the areas of supply and demand.
 - b. Through this synchronisation the learner can make clearer choices with regards to enriching his/her portfolio. The appreciation and validation the learning individual seeks (partially dependent on the goals that have been set) can then be supported by two competence systems. VPL can provide concrete indications of what the most appropriate learning route for personal development is. In doing so, they can also make use of the competence acquisition that can be supported from within the own organisation or through external organisations. This form of VPL is bottom-up oriented VPL and looks for the balance between personal development questions and the most appropriate learning content and design.

4.2 Critical Success Factors

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

Phase 1: Preparation and recognition of competences

- Concentrating on marketing of VPL is highly important. The individual learner should be addressed especially, because if he/she fails to see the need for learning, there will be no lifelong learning at all!
- Collection of practical VPL-examples from all levels, i.e. on individual, organisational and systemic levels.
- Macro level: more stimuli in legislation, financial arrangements and regulations.
- Educational awareness should be raised in an organisation or company.
- Information provision must be made crystal clear to the individual (employee or job-seeker).
- Self-management of competences is crucial: in the division of roles between those involved, the emphasis for the individual is on personal process management; for the organisation on the formulation of aims and the accompanying formulation of demands for competency development; and for the educational institution it is 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 & context of VPL.
- The function of guidance should be strengthened, especially in the 'empowerment-model'.
- The accessibility of a chosen standard is extremely important in the candidate's self-management.

Phase 3: Valuation and Assessment of competences

- more transparency, uniformity, harmonisation and collaboration at sector level and create linkages with national qualifications.
- match competency systems from organisations and educational systems. VPL is the bridge.
- VPL procedures must take place independent of training-programmes.
- No distinction between diplomas acquired on the basis of formal, informal or non-formal learning.
- VPL should be possible at all qualification levels.

Phase 4: Further development of competences

- Organisations have to facilitate personal development plans, provide guidance and make the competence management transparent; creating workbased learning situations also helps.
- Education must value the workplace as a rich learning environment.
- Employees need to self-manage their personal development programmes following a VPL procedure. In this sense, learning-made-to-measure 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% self-management of form and content of the programme (*empowering*) and 0% (*pampering*).

Phase 5: Anchoring VPL

- Organisations must ensure that their formulation of demands is effective. Clear formulation of demands 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 validation and development of available and required competences.

- Research into the effects of VPL: research is needed into the added value of VPL, among other things focussed on its economic, financial and social effects.
- Integration of VPL in HRM-systems: there must be a better integration of VPL into HR policy and practice, aimed at enhancing employability and mobility, increasing voluntary participation and working towards achievable goals.

4.3 Roadmap for further action

It's evident that more research is needed to make clear how the practical use VPL in the context of national strategies for VPL-implementation can come to full bloom. Relevant questions are: how to activate all stakeholders? Which problems and which ambitions can be made transparent? Who does what and with what motive? Which learning-demand is relevant and with which intended learning outcome? How does lifelong learning refer to the general framework that authorities and social partners are maintaining?

In answering these questions the general focus should be on:

- a. Use national and sector policies as a starting point for designing a sector-based framework of VPL-systematics that favours the four main VPL-models which all four stimulate different learning-strategies within the sector,
- b. Put the learner with her/his portfolio in the position of co-designer,
- c. Focus on learning outcomes instead of learning-input,
- d. The total VPL-process is portfolio-based; i.e. validation, accreditation and development. So make sure the bottom-up process of VPL is as well organized as the top-down process of VPL,
- e. Make sure the standards for qualification and/or competence-management are transparent and interchangeable between sector standards and national standards. The job profiles of the sector and the qualifications in the National Qualifications Framework offer good reference material to set up levels in standards, both in education and training as well as in human resources management,
- f. Competence-systems (qualification-standards & competence-management) must be linked in order for the individual to take a pick where, how and why to employ and enrich one's portfolio,
- g. Learning/training is about stimulating the learning triangle of the learner (portfolio-build up), sector/organisation (competence-based HRM) and education (learning-made-to-measure).

By answering these questions a more transparent image can be made of the broad supporting role of VPL for:

1. VPL as an educational model for initiating a particular diploma-programme;
2. VPL as an upgrade/update model for determining an individual's educational and training needs for obtaining initial qualifications,
3. VPL as a HRD model for matching and upgrading employees' competences to match organisational aims;
4. VPL as a lifelong learning model for supporting individual career-opportunities.

More knowledge in the actual use of validation is needed in order to adapt, develop and strengthen the necessary services; for, so much is clear now, VPL connects all stakeholders in lifelong learning strategies! Short-term goals are:

- Stimulating the awareness of the learning individual by offering courses in self-management of competences & portfolio-build up,

- Helping organisations to articulate their need for competences and embed this need in pro-active competence-management,
- Making a match between the already articulated demand for competences on the labour market and the already developed supply of competences in education/training/guidance,
- Preparing the development of new supply of learning-made-to-measure in order to make better matches with the learning-demand deriving from one of the perspectives of lifelong learning-models

When the roadmap is followed, commitment amongst the stakeholders will develop fully. There will be plenty of space to build strong commitment for new ways of learning both within circles of government, education sector and social partners as well as among the citizens. Commitment after all is the most essential precondition for making use of prior learning assessment and thereby changing the ‘looks’ of the formal learning system. Commitment means that all parties involved will take up their own responsibility.

Finally but not least, competence-based learning and VPL might contribute to making learning more a matter of fun again, since learning will be made more to measure. The motivation of learners will therefore be higher. For employers, managers, HR-staff, counsellors, recruiters, teachers, trainers, guides, and others, this will as well be stimulating and inspiring. In this sense one could state that learning will not only be a matter of *employability* but also of “*enjoyability*”!

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