

Dutch VPL at a glance 2008

The development of APL, RPL & VPL in the Netherlands



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OBSERVAL National report: *the Netherlands 2008*

Amstelveen, 2008

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EUROPEAN OBSERVATORY OF VALIDATION OF NON FORMAL & INFORMAL LEARNING

OBSERVAL is a European project (2007-2010) granted by the Leonardo da Vinci programme. EUCEN, the European University Continuing Education Network, is the leader of this project. Partners are teams in 24 countries of the European Union representing the different educational sectors (higher education, vocational education and training, adult education).

The main objective of this project is to create a database on validation of non formal and informal learning in European countries, which will be regularly updated, available in a European Observatory and accessible by Internet. The perspective is to provide documents useful for a large range of actors (decision makers at national and institutional level, social partners, human resources managers, people in charge of validation,...) which are usually confidential or limited in use and dissemination outside the country or the Region or the institution where they have been produced. The project aims at presenting them on common formats in a way that facilitates understanding and allows comparison.

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Lifelong Learning Programme



Contents

Introduction	3
1. Learning and working in the Netherlands	5
2. Terminology in the Netherlands	7
3. National investment in Learning and Working	9
4. History of VPL and of learning cultures in the Netherlands	11
5. The highways of learning	15
6. Examples of APL in Dutch practice	19
7. The process of VPL in a nutshell	21
8. Glancing at the Dutch situation in 2008	25
9. Benchlearning on the basis of Dutch practice	27
References	29
Appendix 1: The dimensions of APL in the Netherlands	31
Appendix 2: Selfmanagement of competencies	37

Introduction

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

In order to be able to deal with people's 'deployment potential', terms such as knowledge, skills and attitude are qualifying and are subsumed under the common denominator 'competencies'. However, competencies include more than that. They also implicitly refer to the talent to adjust to changing circumstances, your flexibility or deployment potential. Therefore, competencies not only include professional competencies but social and personal competencies as well. Competencies are in a continuous state of flux. Learning begins from birth; a continuous learning process that continues throughout life. In fact, life-long learning is already done by everyone, it only needs to be valued and guided.

The knowledge society has a major interest in capitalising on this. It already takes place in part, since more formal educational pathways can be followed in the school system during certain periods in life. More non-formal and informal pathways are followed at other times in life. In short, one is always learning everywhere, and above all, not always in a conscious or self-chosen learning situation. The degree in which individuals and the knowledge society consciously build on this is still strongly underexposed and underutilised at the present time.

The identification, recognition and accreditation of non-formally and informally acquired competencies (EVC) is intended to recognise and to value what people have regarding visible and invisible knowledge and skills. EVC is not designed to highlight the lack of knowledge and skills but precisely the opposite – to take stock of existing knowledge and skills: in other words, rather than being half empty, EVC takes the view that the glass is half full! (Duvekot 2003)

EVC is the Dutch designation of this broad outlook of the vision to life-long learning. In Europe, however, there is a large variety in policy, learning cultures, systems and development processes that can be characterised as EVC but is known under different names in each country. The binding element is that the insight exists in each European country, sometimes short, sometimes longer, that the union of formal, informal and non-formal learning processes is an important individual and above-all social point.

This publication is the 1st Dutch national report for the OBSERVAL-project (Leonardo da Vinci Networks 133980-LLP-1-BE-LEONARDO-LNW). It focuses on the state of the art in 2008 of policy, implementation and practices of EVC in the Netherlands

2. Learning and working in the Netherlands

The Netherlands have more than 16 million inhabitants, with an average population density of 479 persons per km². Approximately 8 million people were employed in different kind of sectors in 2004. The Netherlands have a relatively low unemployment rate of 6,5 % in 2004 (CBS, see factsheet of the Netherlands). In economical difficult times it is often the lower educated people and the university qualified people who get unemployed. People who got vocational or higher vocational education have a lower unemployment rate. Retail and professional services cover together the biggest part of the Dutch employment (See figure 1.1).

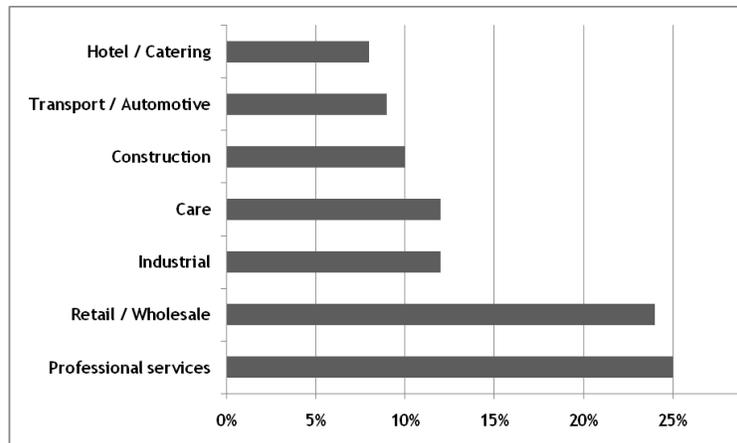


Figure 1.1 the employment in the main sectors

Source: Heijerman, Kenniscentrum EVC (2005)

Human status

The

face numerous challenges in the transition from the industrial economy to the knowledge society. The main challenges are:

- Ageing of the workforce. Within 5-10 years traditional recruitment won't be able to fill in the gap of the pensioned people. This has consequences involving organisations and the costs of, for example, pensions, health care and care for the elderly.
- The number of unskilled people rises. It is now almost 20% out of 8 million workers.
- The need for upskilling the workforce. The shortage of higher (vocational) educated people is rising. The percentage of higher educated workers will have to rise from 21% in 2000 to 31% in 2010. Those levels are for upper secondary VET-levels staying the same: 40% and for low- or unskilled labour dropping from 39% to 29% (Genabeek et al 2007).
- The need for attracting migrants. It is estimated that the Netherlands faces a structural shortage of labour power in 2050 of almost 300.000 full-time equivalents. Only by starting now with attracting migrants (esp. from level 3 upwards) we can solve this problem (Berkhout et al 2007). These figures for France are a structural shortage of about 800.000 jobs in 2050 out of a present total of 24,5 million workers.
- The Dutch *Polder-model* is famous for its organisation of general consensus between the main stakeholders (government & social partners) concerning economical and social questions. This model however doesn't communicate properly anymore with the ones that have to work and learn: the individual citizens.

Formal education

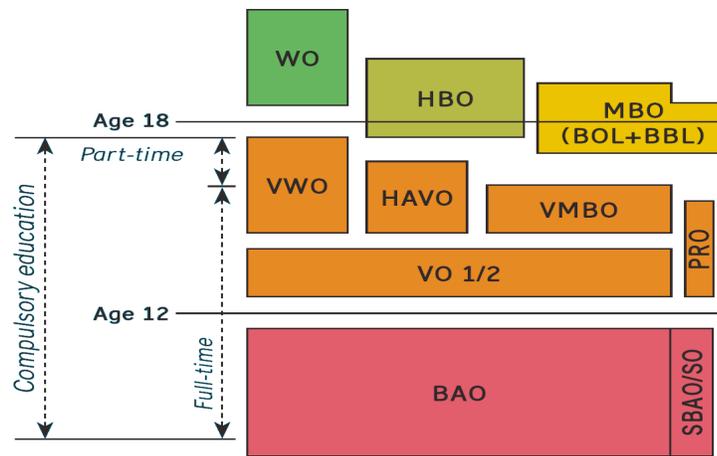
People in the Netherlands have compulsory education from the age of five till they are at least sixteen years old. Most of the children start at nursery school when they are four years old. Approximately 3,5 million pupils, students and adults are following formal education on different kind of levels. The diagram shows the simplistic structure of formal education (Figure 1.2).

resource

Netherlands

Vocational education consists of the job-accompanying learning path (BBL) and the job education learning path (BOL). Within the BBL practical work is most important (minimal 60% of the time) and within the BOL this is between 20 and 60%. BOL can be done fulltime (VT) or part-time (DT) – less than 850 hours educational programme - be done. In the year 2003/2004, a total of 278,780 persons followed senior secondary vocational education, of which 161,810 BBL and 316,970 BOL. The absolute number of participants following adult education was 162,480. More pupils follow Preparatory Vocational Education (60 %) than General Secondary Education (40%).

Vocational education has four sectors (economy, technical, service & health and agricultural sector) and four qualification levels: assistant in training (level 1), basis-vocational education (level 2), professional education (level 3) and middle management / specialists (level 4). Higher Vocational Education is level 5. In the upcoming years the government wants to stimulate people to get into higher education (HBO or WO). More than 50 % should follow higher education in 5 till 10 years.



- BAO** Mainstream primary education
- BBL** Block or day release in vocational education
- BOL** Full-time vocational training
- HAVO** General secondary education
- HBO** Higher professional education
- MBO** Vocational education
- PRO** Practical training
- SBAO/SO** Special primary education
- SO** Special education
- VMBO** Pre-vocational secondary education
- VO** Secondary education
- VSO** Secondary special education
- VWO** Pre-university education
- WO** University education

Figure 1.2 The Dutch educational system

Source: Dutch Ministry of Education (2006)

2. Terminology in the Netherlands

Lifelong learning is about making use of personal competencies. Everyone should be aware that people are always learning everywhere, and above all, not always in a conscious or self-chosen learning situation. The degree in which individuals and the knowledge society consciously build on this is still strongly underexposed and under-utilised. In the knowledge society, the focus is or should be on the individual learning process.

A complicating factor in dealing with this focus is that the formal procedures of teaching, training and assessment describe only a very limited part of the individual learning potential or competencies. Competencies acquired in informal and non-formal situations are also essential for optimal performance on the labour market or in social functions.

This complexity of individual learning and the opportunities it offers for the knowledge society were recognised in 1995 in the White Paper of the European Commission "*Towards the Learning Society*" (EC 1995). While learning within the formal systems for education and training is a distinguishing factor of a modern society, learning that takes place outside this sphere is much more difficult to identify and value. "Lifelong Learning" was proposed as a central organising concept and "Valuing Learning" became one of the key messages (EC 2001). 'Valuing learning' stands for the process of recognising participation in and outcomes of formal or non-formal learning, in order to raise awareness of its intrinsic worth and to reward learning. With the proposals of the Commission, the invisibility of all sorts of learning processes was effectively problematised. This problem was related to all levels of the individual (different employability-potential, knowledge and application levels) and society (all levels: international, national, regional, local, sectoral and organisation).

The focus in Lifelong Learning policy slowly shifted from the traditional approach of 'learning in the classroom' to the wish to utilise 'other learning environments' such as work environment, independent learning, remote learning, implicit learning and leisure activities. This actually meant making use of non-formal and informal learning. This started up the general process of identification, assessment, valuation and accreditation of all formal, non-formal and informal learning. But still the valuing itself is pulled into the formal accreditation system, mainly directed to the formal job descriptions, instead of becoming an individual means to personal ends focusing on one's career-opportunities. Lately, for instance in the European Common Principles on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (EU 2004), we see a shift to the valuation of competencies developed in all possible learning environments. In terms of valuation of prior learning the focus is integral or even holistic and is meant to deal with the diversity of goals people pursue with the use of their prior learning. For this kind of holistic or integral use of prior learning it matters which name is used for the kind of instrumentation of the process: VPL, APL or RPL.

'Valuing learning' has two main paths, a summative and a formative one (Duvekot, et al. 2005). The summative approach aims at an overview of competencies, recognition and valuation. Its goal is certification, where individuals seek this goal. When 'valuing learning' goes one step further and includes practical learning and/or personal competence-development, we call this the formative approach. This approach is pro-active and aims at development by designing a personal career and development path.

At this moment the commonly used term is Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL). In Dutch this is '*de Erkennung van Verworven Competenties (EVC)*'. The authorities, as well as the social partners and the schools prefer this term because this approach mainly focuses on the summative effects of recognizing and assessing prior learning. The most important element in an APL-strategy is the assessment of the competencies that are collected in a portfolio with the goal of getting exemptions or a diploma, referring to a specific standard. The portfolio is in this context mainly a showcase of only the competencies that matter for the standard itself; all the other personal competencies are irrelevant. The choice for a specific standard is in practice more

steered by the availability of an actual standard than by a free, personal choice. This is because most of the times a school - as the keeper of the standard(s) – tends to look more to the best chance of success when measured against any given standard than to the best match of a standard and personal ambitions. So, in effect, APL is more standard-steered, and as most standards are kept by schools (upper secondary and higher vocational levels) also strongly school-steered.

With Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) the primary focus lies on the identification and recognition of the competencies that someone might have obtained in any period in his/her life and in any kind of learning environment. In Dutch this is '*de Herkenning van Verworven Competenties (HVC*¹)' (Stienstra 2008). In this context the portfolio consists of all personal learning experiences. Only after collecting all the relevant, personal competencies together with their proof, a choice is made by the person. In this way the personal ambitions are better articulated and depending on the personal goal a specific choice for the kind of accreditation or validation is made. RPL, therefore is more personal steered and might involve not only summative but also formative goals.

It is interesting to see that, in analogy with the Anglo-Saxon learning culture, in the Netherlands also a shift occurs in the focus of lifelong learning strategies towards the Recognition of Prior Learning. This is due to the growing awareness on the real societal problematic, namely how to make people invest in themselves if the necessary infrastructure is available (funds, methods, instruments and functions). With RPL 'the job might be done' in a bottom-up way. RPL is more and more seen as the real matchmaker with the more top-down strategy of APL. This implementation of RPL will be explained more thoroughly in the chapter "It's my competence they're after!"

When looking at both terms – RPL and APL - VPL stands for the process of Valuation of Prior Learning (VPL). VPL embodies the necessity to make top-down processes such as APL meet the bottom-up process of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). If combined APL and RPL are constituting the integral or even holistic process of Valuation of Prior Learning. So, VPL is the real designation of developing, implementing and embedding lifelong learning in society, in the Learning Society so to say; VPL is for the sake of citizens as well as providers and organisations (profit, non-profit, voluntary work, labour-agencies, communities, etc). VPL is able to manage in a flexible way the diversity of goals all these parties and partners have in making use of lifelong learning strategies.

1 The term '*HVC*' was introduced by mr. Sjoerd Stienstra at the conference on EVC [APL] in Willemstad, Curaçao, October 31, 2008.

3. National investment in Learning and Working

In the years 2005-2007, the national government invested nearly 40 million Euro in APL at upper secondary and higher vocational education levels, in developing a regional infrastructure and in promoting APL. This policy was put forward in the working plan for 2005-2007 *Strengthening Learning and Working* (PLW 2005). The ministries of Education, Culture and Science, of Social Affairs and Employment, of Agriculture and Nature Management, of Economic Affairs, of Integration and of Finances were involved.

In the implementation strategy, management and practice come together. At management level educational institutions were encouraged to implement APL institution-wide. They signed agreements with the government to realise a certain number of APL procedures within one or two years and to guarantee a minimum quality standard of these procedures. Practices already in use for some years were spread and the quality-issue of the procedures was raised. To strengthen the promotion of APL by the already since 2001 existing Dutch Knowledge Centre on APL (Duvekot 2005a), regional one-stop-offices were set up also to actively promote the use of APL. It is a big step forward that all local partners in education and labour market are working more and more together and attune their procedures. The aim is that any individual can enter these local one-stop-offices to be guided in their development process. Companies are offered tailor-made solutions for their questions relating to human resources and all regional partners take their share to realise it.

Some projects at sectoral level are subsidised by national government as well to promote APL and work together with regional networks and educational institutions at any educational level. Although not all targets have been met within the given period of time, the investment policy of government still continues for the coming years. Creating an infrastructure for APL, or starting the implementation of APL in an educational institution takes more time than predicted. In recent years however, the stimulation policy has brought about a lot of energy, encouraged many new actors to offer and promote APL, and has made APL more known amongst a bigger group of institutions and individuals. Certainly, all these activities contribute to the realisation of life long learning for individuals and in society.

In the coming years, the ministries of Education, Culture and Science, and of Social Affairs and Employment will continue to jointly promote life long learning by also focusing APL. Themes will be among others learning & working programmes in the technical and health care sectors, 60.000 extra learning & working programmes for employees and job seekers older than 23 years old, and extra programmes for long term unemployed and young workers between 18 and 23 years old without basic qualification (Dungen, et al, 2007).

When looking at APL the government is stimulating this by motivating that adults can cash in their experiences from work and free time for a diploma. APL has been the subject of study for many years but was only applied to a limited degree until 2005. Yet APL can mean much gain in learning and time for adults. That is why the target for 2007 was ambitious with 20.000 APL trajectories. That goal was not reached. Currently, at the beginning of 2008, over 15.000 trajectories have been completed: about 11.000 in upper secondary education levels and about 4.250 at higher vocational education level by 15 professional universities (PLW 2008).

Looking at the main targets of APL within these numbers (more than one target is possible for each APL-procedure) (Dungen, et al, 2007):

- 54% is used for shortening learning programmes,
- 51% is aiming at exemptions,
- 44% is looking for qualification or certification,
- 40% focuses on career-development,
- 12% seeks a validation of the portfolio itself.

Apart from these numbers, a quality code for APL was signed in 2006 by the education sector, employers and employees. The quality code is an important step towards guaranteeing quality,

garnering support and granting insight into the supply of APL. About 130 APL providers are currently entered and can be found in the 'Register for Recognised APL providers'. The quality code for APL itself aims to achieve more transparency and comparability and make APL more accessible. It contains the following items:

1. The goal of APL is to define, evaluate and accredit individual competencies.
2. APL primarily answers to the need of the individual. Entitlements and arrangements are clearly defined and guaranteed.
3. Procedures and instruments are reliable and based on solid standards.
4. Assessors and supervisors are competent, impartial and independent.
5. The quality of the APL procedure is guaranteed and is being improved on an ongoing basis.

The implementation of a quality-code is part of the top-down strategy to strengthen the instrumentation of APL. The question however is whether this effort is really necessary. Quality assurance is in effect about organising confidence. In this context, it was already suggested in 2001 in the national policy-paper 'The glass is half filled' that setting up a professional register or association for assessors, including the standard setting for assessors and their training, could do the trick. Another option is certification of the trainer of the assessors, so as to make known that the assessors trained meet the expectations of reliability, independence and transparency. For that matter, APL can be left to existing examination committees of schools and universities, as it is in France (Charraud, in: Duvekot et al., 2005); the advantage here is that *valuing learning* is directly embedded in the existing assessment system without requiring the setup of an extra layer of 'quality assurance bureaucracy'.

4. History of VPL and of learning cultures in the Netherlands

In the development of lifelong learning, the link between formal and non-formal learning is surely very complex. In many countries, the formal education systems are becoming more flexible in recognising non-formal learning. However, most individuals still lack access to a life-long and life-wide learning continuum. The crux therefore is to discuss the way lifelong learning is inevitably moving towards a process steered by the individuals. This 'individual element' is surely a revolutionary breakthrough, overlooking more than 500 years of vocational training where the learner had little influence over formal learning, while 'schools', social partners and authorities historically controlled vocational training. This focus on using prior learning for a diversity of goals by the citizens, is concentrating on efforts to make the process more bottom-steered and find a balance between top-down instrumentation and infrastructure and bottom-up portfolio build-up and setting of personal goals in the context of the Learning Society. In order to get a better grip on this two-folded approach it is enriching to take a look into the history and the development of APL and of transitions in learning cultures as well.

A short history of Dutch VPL

Learning always consisted of "learning by falling and getting up again." As the division of labour arose, so too arose the need to institutionalize learning and working in a system of professional training, because increasing job and profession differentiation required learning specific skills to be able to function in a given profession.

A good example of an approach that is both structured and based on a single professional "column" is the guild system of the Middle Ages, in which employers dominated with a view to labour market regulation and protection. This system dominated the urban economy until deep into the eighteenth century. Education was a private initiative involving cooperation with local authorities (Israel, 1997).

The subsequent trades system brought little change. Professional training in the trades society was dominated and driven by employers and practice-based learning, and happened largely within the professional column. Although charitable institutions did provide for an early form of institutionalised professional education in work-study schools (Lis, et al. 1985), the most powerful relationship of authority was and remained that of employer and employee.

With national legislation in 1919, the industrial society developed the knowledge infrastructure into a system with a great deal of responsibility on the part of government and social partners. Increasingly, the system was the central focus, with certification within the professional column as the goal. In the 1960s the Secondary Education Act created the perspective of "continued learning" which had a general perspective and was no longer dictated by purely economic interests. The objectives were to create some order in the forms of professional education and to provide some integration of professional and general education (Boekholt & De Booy, 1987).

It took as long as the 1980s for the discussion to start on restructuring professional training. The debate more and more focused on the need to connect it better with the actual needs of the labour market. The work of a number of successive commissions paved the way for VPL, particularly in terms of the focus on the learning individual and the concept of competencies. The most influential Commission was that of Professor Wijnen that worked on questions relating to better utilization of learning processes both in and out of school, and on strengthening the impact of on-the-job learning on the labour market. The most significant conclusion in the commission's report (Wijnen 1994) was that a system recognizing non-formal and informal acquired qualifications was feasible and needed. And so, the "EVK-concept" [or in the English equivalent 'APQ-concept'] was born: 'the accreditation of qualifications earned elsewhere', the premise being the official qualification or certification of educational tracks participated in previously (whether or not completed).

The next step would be the validation of 'competencies'! In the meantime however, the government greeted the Wijnen-report with enthusiasm. EVK could make a useful contribution to

matching the labour and education markets. The government would provide instruments for EVK, including development funding. Schools, job centres, companies and other parties picked up EVK and ran with it. But there was a lack of adequate support, and the initial enthusiasm ebbed.

After a brief lull, the government kicked things back into gear in 1998 with a national action programme on Lifelong learning: "The workplace needs to be used more as a place of learning. The experiences gained must be made visible as independently acquired competencies. The cabinet wishes to promote this by setting up a system by which knowledge acquired elsewhere (that is, outside of the educational system) can be tested and accredited." (Actieprogramma 1998). This was an important step towards expanding on the EVK concept to the valuation of learning experiences acquired outside of the formal educational system. These experiences gained in the workplace would be revealed, and then tested and accredited; with this, the Q of qualifications became a C (*competenties*, or competencies) and since then, the system has been referred to as *erkenning van verworven competenties* (EVC in Dutch, or APL in English). The social partners also made an important contribution to this shift towards competency-based professional training. So, time had come for the implementation of all the ambitious plans.

The Glass is Half Full

With the publication of *De Fles is Half Vol!* ("The glass is half full!") in 2000, a first step towards lifelong learning using APL was taken. A national APL working group formulated a broad vision on APL and the implementation process. APL had to bridge the gap between the education supply and the demand on the labour market side. The challenge was to connect these two worlds via the learner, on the one hand by converting learning experiences into certificates or diplomas, and on the other by allowing for the development of competencies in a career context (Werkgroep EVC 2001).

To support this application of APL and to learn from the existing practice, the government established the Knowledge Centre APL (*Kenniscentrum EVC*) in 2001. The Knowledge Centre's goal is, on the basis of collecting practical examples, to promote the use of APL in the labour market and to take APL to a higher qualitative level. It became clear that there were many situations in which APL could be used and led towards a variety of effects, but did not automatically lead to the desired effects (Duvekot & Brouwer, 2004). Factors and circumstances that could have a negative impact include more restrictive legislation or regulations, fear of change, system failures, general conservatism or a too short-sighted view of the return on investment. On the other hand, the positive effects of APL were seen mainly at the sector level. Thanks to APL, in sectors such as the health care and education sector, recruitment and selection of personnel is increasingly happening among target groups without the formal requirements. APL is also functional in areas such as retention of personnel and attrition and disability prevention. Employees in the construction sector are being offered new career opportunities based on competency recognition and comparison with adjacent sectors. The next step is to promote mobility and upgrading of personnel. In particular, providing sitting personnel with "refresher courses" can be structured efficiently around a good picture of existing competencies. Outflow and outplacement of personnel also benefit. The military, for example, has a high proportion of employees with fixed-term appointments. To be more successful at replacing these employees on the labour market, APL can offer both development and qualification. Likewise, in mergers and reorganizations, APL offers development and qualifications to find the right place for personnel, whether internally or externally. The financial return of APL is seen not so much in the costs of education and training, but in the lowering of the costs for absence of leave. In APL projects in companies such as Rockwool, Corus and Friesland Foods, considerable savings were achieved, ranging from EUR 3,000 to EUR 16,000 per employee, due to lower costs for absence of leave (EVC Magazine, 2005).

From guild learning to lifelong learning (± 1000 AC – 2000 AC)

To summarize this development process an overview can be given of the most significant changes in the nature of professional training through history. Table 1 shows that there are shifts within the objectives, the composition of the target group, within the authority relationships and in relation to the use of summative and/or formative aspects. Since the days of the guild system, professional training has come a long way. At this point we have arrived at a point at which both tripartite implementation and responsibility is a reality. Within this development, there are signs of a shift from the dominance of the knowledge infrastructure in organising the professional training to the level of the profession itself: the workplace, where individual and organization come together. We have now almost come full-circle; in the guild system there was, of course, also close cooperation in this area. The fundamental differences, however, are that the objective of the process has continued to develop, from a focus on initial training to a lifelong learning strategy (or preparations for a lifelong learning strategy). The target group has been expanded from young, starting employees to anyone who wants to be or has to become employable. Additionally, individual and organization collaborate on the details of the process. Employee mobility is no longer limited to a single workplace, but is increasingly seen as an inter-sector phenomenon. Finally, the focus has slowly shifted from a summative to a formative approach to professional training, and *valuing learning* offers an opening to make the transition from input-based to output-based learning strategies; a logical step, considering the changing objective of professional training and the opportunities for inter-sector mobility.

Table 1: From guild learning to lifelong learning						
	Objective*	Target group	Authority	Mobility	Summative/ formative	Learning characteristic
Guild system	Initial professional training	New employees in professional column	Organization	None	Summative	Input, learning by doing
Trades economy	Initial professional training	New employees in professional column	Organization	None	Summative	Input, learning by doing
Industrial era	Initial professional training & lifelong learning	New employees in professional column & retrainees	Organization & Knowledge infrastructure	None	Summative	Input, learning by doing & formal learning
Knowledge economy	Initial professional training & lifelong learning	starting employees/ career changers in professional columns/ retrainees	Organization & Knowledge infrastructure & individual	Intra-sector	Summative & formative	Input/ output, Formal and non-formal learning
(coming) Lifelong learning	lifelong learning	Everyone	Individual & organization & knowledge infrastructure	Inter-sector	Summative & formative	Output, <i>valuing learning</i>

* where two or more functions/roles are given, entries in **bold** indicate the dominant function/role

5. The highways of learning

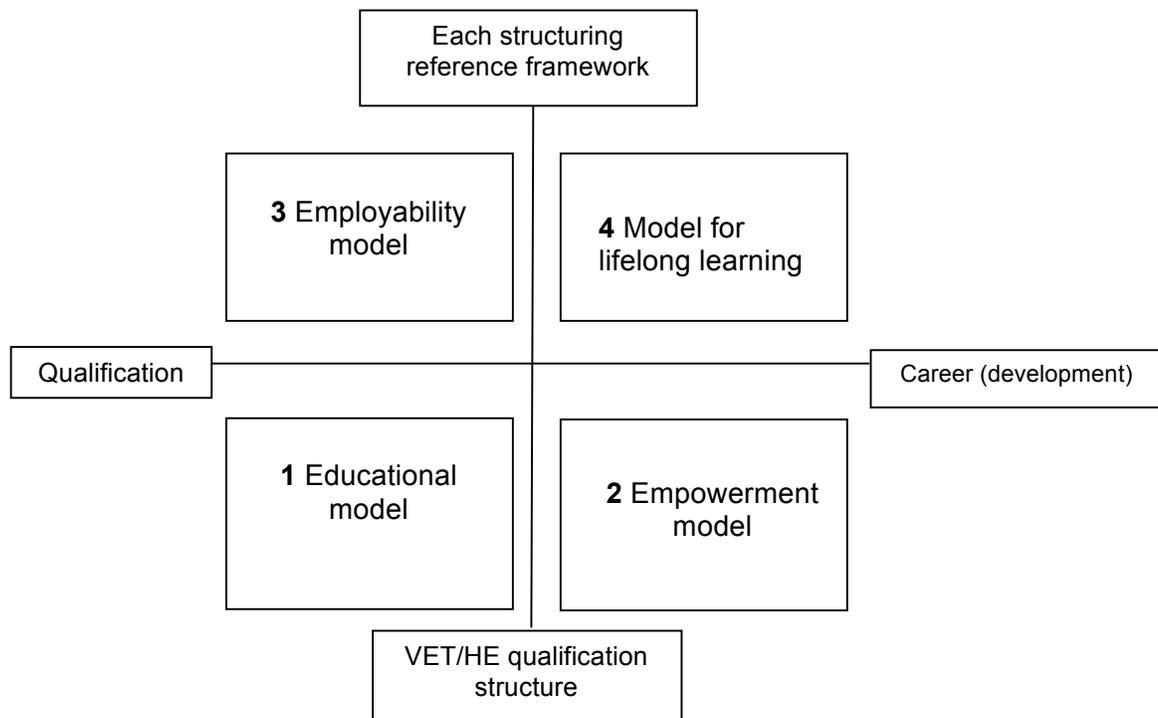
The analysis of the existing practice from the Dutch field (Duvekot, et al. 2003) resulted in a first analysis showing that depending on the intended effect or return (certification or career-making) and the frame of reference used (national or sectoral standards in VET and HE), there were four main forms of APL:

1. APL as a bridge between education and labour market, focused on cooperation between the professional and adult education sector on the one hand and the branches and sectors in the labour market on the other;
2. APL as structurer of innovation processes in education and labour mediation, focused on acquisition of starting qualifications for people with low education or no education;
3. APL as jump start for individual careers. Employability - to get and keep a job - is the key;
4. APL as an instrument for human resource management at organizational level, the driver being the professionalization of personnel *at the workplace*.

This first analysis laid the ground for capturing the diversity of practices of APL in Europe and in the Netherlands (Duvekot, et al. 2007). The added value of the holistic approach of VPL was that the four forms described above turned into 'highways' for learning in the societal context; a context in which the integral or holistic approach of VPL is showing actually four highways or models :

1. VPL in an *educational model* for initiating a particular qualification;
2. VPL in an *Empowerment model* for determining educational/training needs of organisations or individuals;
3. VPL in an *Employability model* for matching employees' competencies to organisational aims;
4. VPL in a *lifelong learning model* for supporting personal development.

Figure 1: the four 'Highways of Learning'



Procedures for Valuing Learning are implemented in a variety of ways. Three steps can always be distinguished: identifying competencies and raising awareness (recognition), assessing

competencies (validation) and planning new learning activities (personal development). Possible implications of these procedures are promoting personal self-management of competencies and personal development activities. Apart from that 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 Valuing 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 Valuing Learning can be used to serve a particular goal within a particular context: the four models or highways of learning.

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

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

The function of Valuing 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; competencies 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 competencies acquired elsewhere.

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

2. Valuing Learning as model for acquisition of initial qualifications: the empowerment model

Valuing 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:

- Recognition and accreditation of competencies 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.
- Recognition and accreditation of competencies that have been acquired (formally and informally) in the context of the occupation that the candidate intends to maintain or pursue.

Valuing Learning is tailored to the employment goals of the candidate. The competencies 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. Valuing Learning as model for upgrading competencies within any structured context: the employability model

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

People acquire competencies 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. Sectoral 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 competencies based on other standards.

The aim of Valuing 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 competencies acquired elsewhere. Personal development is offered by providing validation and learning at the workplace.

4. Valuing 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 valuing the competencies 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 competencies.

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.

6. Examples of APL in Dutch practice

Construction sector

The construction sector offers a good example of the employability model in which Valuing Learning aims at both qualification and career effects. Since July 2006, the Collective Labour Agreement has provided a career track for employers and employees. The participants are some 130,000 construction personnel and 65,000 office positions. These employees are informed of their career opportunities within the sector. The most important goal is getting the right employee into the right place, and in so doing, to keep ambitious employees in the sector, prevent attrition due to disability and promote reintegration. Each track is individual, custom work, and requires effort on the part of all parties involved. A collective determination is made of what focus on other work is required, what tests are called for and what education/training is the most appropriate. A consensus is also obtained on the arrangements on the time commitment and financing of the process (Loopbaantraject Bouw, 2006).

Welfare in Rotterdam

The project *Hidden talents* in Rotterdam, the Netherlands (VPL2-case studies, 2006) is an example of the empowerment or upgrade model. "What someone's abilities already are isn't interesting. Just looking at the yet unknown is the real learning ground." This is the statement of a training trajectory aimed at emancipating and empowering its participants, namely "Hidden Talents" in Rotterdam.

This project was intended for people of 23 years and older that didn't have a paid job for a year or more or work in irregular, low-skilled and subsidized jobs. The Regional Bureau for Education started the project because they saw that these people hardly ever could find a regular job while at the same time the necessary skills were available.

One of the causes for this is that these people in one way or another were not able to face the learning system in compulsory education. Most of them never finished their initial education. So they didn't have a starting qualification with which they would have been able to enter the labour market properly.

The procedure itself doesn't differ so much from 'ordinary' validation-procedures; that means always following the triptych of portfolio – assessment - personal development plan. The crucial difference, and probably also the key for its success, is the attention to individual guidance and the support they get from each other, their 'colleagues'.

The result was that in 2003-2004 as many as 64 men went through the validation-procedure. Together they got approximately 200 exemptions for courses they failed when they were in initial education or dropped out. Several of them could finish their professional training in less than a year instead of the normal two to three years they would otherwise have to undergo. Above all, the education they now got was tailor made, i.e. content and form were designed to their learning-attitude. Getting them through upper secondary vocational education into higher vocational education is the future goal of the project. In this way, this target group will really be able to face the needs of the learning society. Their employability is based on making learning for them a matter of enjoyability: learning in their own time, speed, level, environment and using their already acquired competencies through non-formal learning.

Technology and electronics sector

Philips is acclaimed by its progressive strategy of training and development of their employees. The first experiments with the accreditation of prior learning were not successful, but they didn't give up. Their current project on training and development -'Certification of craftsmanship'- is the biggest in its history and aims to bring the level of their practically experienced employees to basic qualification level. APL is one of the instruments used in this process. More than 2000 employees have attained their diploma, others are in the process or ready to start soon. For most of them it is the first diploma in their lives, and a very important one, increasing their employability significantly.

Despite the first negative experiences with APL, human resource managers continued to use the instrument APL and gained the experience how to do it in an optimal way. Nowadays, Philips doesn't buy all elements of the APL-procedure from a provider, but is involved very actively itself to gain expertise. Furthermore, the APL provider is required to offer a tailor-made training programme with a precise indication of the duration. With these conditions, APL in combination with learning-and-working programmes proved to be very successful for the individual employees.

Trade Union policy

An example of the size of target groups for which VPL is within reach is the group executive members of AbvaKabo FNV. This group of trade union volunteers is some 13.000 members strong. Alongside their regular work, they volunteer in a range of competency profiles for the trade union, in positions such as trade union consultant, career counsellor, participation council member, trade union school instructor, and the like. These volunteer positions are set out in competency profiles that can be derived into VET/HE diplomas. The derivation process can be readily evaluated with a VPL procedure. The degree to which an recommendation then leads to a qualification (APL) or a career track (VPL) is a matter to be worked out between the individual and the organization for which that individual works (Burgt 2005). Despite of the problems of matching trade union voluntary work with formal qualifications the focus on personal lifelong learning trajectories is still very strong. Debated is if and how the volunteers should be facilitated, either by the education system or by a national trade union academy.

Benefits

These examples show that large groups from very different contexts and with different objectives can use Valuing Learning. The bottleneck for making use of Valuing Learning is less the knowledge infrastructure or organizations and more the individual's unfamiliarity with Valuing Learning. This means that it is primarily the transition to individual empowerment that is causing the present underutilization of Valuing 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.

In the recommendations on 'new learning' (SER 2002), the Dutch Social-Economic Council confirmed the need for a more open role on a more equal footing for the individual. It calls for a reinforcement of the position and responsibility of the individual on the post-initial education market as an important solution track for giving lifelong learning a more structural position in the knowledge infrastructure. In this way, the individual creates a new balance, as animator of lifelong learning between the actors in the knowledge economy. Actual utilization of the opportunities is the central focus. It stresses the need for the development of relationships on a more equal footing between the actors, including initiatives for career steps across different professional columns.

7. The process of VPL in a nutshell

In order to facilitate or even empower individual learners it is necessary to have a clear view of the process of Valuing Learning and the role of these individuals in the process. Valuing Learning is an integral process in five phases (Duvekot 2006). Together these five phases take ten steps in which the learning individual can make him/herself co-maker of the process:

- the preparatory phase aiming at commitment and raising awareness of the value of someone's competencies,
- the recognition of someone's competencies,
- the valuation and validation of someone's competencies,
- (advice concerning the) development of someone's competencies
- The structural implementation of this process in individually of organisationally steered policy.

In Figure 2 these steps are shown, including the relevant questions in each step.

Figure 2: The process of 'Valuing Learning'		
Phase	Step + question	Action individual
I. Preparation	1. awareness <i>Which necessity is there for self-investment?</i>	Being accessible to lifelong learning Inventory of personal learning wishes Start self-management of competencies
	2. setting targets <i>Which learning targets are relevant?</i>	SWOT-analysis Formulate learning targets
II. Recognition	3. setting a personal profile <i>how to determine the need for competencies?</i>	Writing 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. standardsetting <i>what is the relevant standard related to the targets?</i>	Choosing a standard self-assessment inventory of career-opportunities
	6. valuation <i>How to get valuated?</i>	Valuation of the portfolio; getting advice on certification- and careeropportunities
	7. validation <i>How to get validated?</i>	Turning the certification-advice into proper certification
IV. Development	8. prospection <i>How to set up a personal development plan (PDP)?</i>	Turning the careeradvice into a PDP Arranging learning-made-to-measure
	9. implementing a PDP <i>Working om learning targets</i>	Execute PDP
V. Implementa- tion	10. Structural implementation & empowerment <i>How did it go? If ok, how to embed VPL structural in a personal lifelong learning strategy?</i>	evaluation of the process maintaining portfolio-documentation

In the matrix 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 Valuing Learning. Without this learning will remain school- or company-steered and cannot effectively be built on individual motivation 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; 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 might be 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.
 There are different instruments available for this kind of self-assessment, for instance the Swiss *CH-Q* instrument. (*CH-Q* = Schweizer Qualificationsbuch; Schuur, et al, 2003). It is an integral system for valuing prior learning. It consists of a broad package of services: portfolio, (self-) assessment, career-planning, action-planning, quality-control and accompanying training programmes. See also Appendix 2.
 In general tools like *CH-Q* aim at personal development or career-planning in training and profession 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-makship by:
 - providing the basis for a goal-directed development and career-planning,
 - the stimulation of personal development,
 - the support of self managed learning and acting,
 - 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 *matchmaker* between a portfolio, including a personal action plan, and the specific development steps advised by the assessor. In any given model for Valuing Learning 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 very flexible in being able to meet the many objectives to give a custom-oriented validation and/or valuation. On top of that the professional should be able to use especially 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 certain assessor role therefore largely depends on the objective of the assessment, which can vary greatly. Assessments for formal recognition of competencies 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 competencies at the company or institution level or merely to acquire insight into someone's competencies 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.
 In order to guarantee good 'quality' of the assessor on the one hand and prevent a new qualitycontrol-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 highly cost-effective and therefore very accessible to candidates. Possibilities for organising 'quality-light' are:

- any assessor should first design and fill in his/her own portfolio and personal actionplan; only then they can be given entrance to assessor-trainings,
 - a professional register for assessors should guarantee their competencies and professionalism,
 - every two-year a new accreditation for assessors should guarantee their professionalism by making sure they are updating and upgrading, and therefore maintaining their quality. This accreditation could be carried out by an official national agency, governed tripartite (authorities and social partners),
 - quality of assessors implies being able to refer to a standard for assessors: this standard is developed in many EU-projects and already available; it only needs a European frame and national application.
5. Proper **evaluation** and **feedback** finally is necessary to structurally embed the process into the dynamics of a customer-oriented education-policy, a human resource development policy and personal lifelong learning strategies.

8. Glancing at the Dutch situation in 2008

On the role of qualifications

In the Netherlands the role of APL is in general a conventional approach, i.e. a summative one. This has to do with the low rate of Dutch unemployment and the supply-dominated learning system. However, the stimulus for applying APL – and therefore turning APL into VPL - isn't so much the goal of certification but more the goal of enriching one's portfolio for the sake of empowerment and employability. This is reflected in the growing appreciation of VPL as a means to set up personal development schemes.

Currency of qualifications

There is one national standard for VET and Higher Vocational Education (HE). APL is more and more used to bridge the gap between the systems of education and human resource management (HRM) on the basis of translating prior learning to mutually recognizable qualifications. Therefore APL – and again as it is changing into VPL - is more and more aiming at building up continuing education on top of initial VET and HE. There is an awareness that double currencies of qualifications will have negative effects because the status of formally acquired diploma's is very strong; so, non-formally acquired diploma's will be stigmatized as less valued.

Labour market developments

Concerning the labour market developments a reflection on Dutch evidence where:

- a shift is occurring from internal firm-mobility (lifetime employment) to intra-sectoral (building sector) and even inter-sectoral mobility (education),
- generic competencies are becoming more relevant in education (VET/HE) and labour market (HRM). This opens up inter-sectoral mobility using the same generic competencies as an access-point and workbased learning as a way to deal effectively with acquiring the needed specific competencies. In this way structural portfolio-build up is (going to be) stimulated,
- APL is changing into the more holistic VPL and becoming an integral part of HRM – and therewith turning HRMN into the more dynamic HRD - , especially to fill in vacancies in unskilled and highly-skilled occupations. APL opens up HRM in this sense because it stresses the fact that you might be valued to perform in a function without having the formal qualifications; and APL changes into VPL and even more, HRM into HRD,
- Creating professional registers is more debated than the obligation of qualification. This means debating how to prove and maintain competencies instead of focusing on qualifications. A register might also be a way to enforce qualitycontrol of personal competence-management in different functions (cross-sectoral or multi-sectoral) and professions.

Consensus

In the Netherlands the consensus on the macro-level is very strong. Government and social partners already in 2000 concluded (Werkgroep EVC 2000) that APL was one of the main solutions encountering the needs of the knowledge society. A lot of the obstacles to implementation on sectoral, regional and even organisation (schools and firms) levels are still very strong. Fear of poaching, a run on higher wages and losing a position on the 'learning market' are the main arguments against using APL. Practice however is showing more and more that the profits are bigger than the fears. APL effectively reduces the non-necessary learning and therefore leads to a higher output of learning itself. The biggest problem is more to convince the individual learner to invest in him/herself and to make the learning system offer flexible and work-based learning paths.

The system

Looking at the system itself: the Dutch APL-system is not very transparent, especially step 1 (demand information) in the APL-process. Information is given by APL-providers and not by intermediates. This doesn't help access to APL. Furthermore APL is not embedded in universities (academic levels; apart from the Open University) and in private training-programmes.

Dutch candidates are more male, either unskilled or higher skilled (from level 3 on). Their aims are qualifications for employability-reasons, on a voluntary basis or on demand by their employers.

Dutch APL is in theory based on the validation of learning outcomes. The input-orientation of the education system prohibits however a good match with individual portfolios and qualification enrichment. Psychological effects like "proudness" are visible in many case studies.

Making the shift?

The Dutch situation is on the one hand the same (consensus, aiming at qualifications) as the rest of Europe but on the other hand different: the focus already shifts to giving the individual part of the power of control in the APL-process and therewith making the system more accessible with a bottom-up strategy, focusing on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). This leads to a solid foundation for stimulating the more holistic approach of VPL on the labour market in HRM and is going to set APL free from the dominance of the education system.

9. Benchlearning on the basis of Dutch practice

Various recommendations and issues concerning the diversity of the application of APL, the starting up of the bottom-up process of RPL and the further implementation of the integral VPL in the Dutch practice can be useful for benchlearning in the European area. The Dutch recommendations for benchlearning focus on the subsequent phases in the process.

Phase 1: Preparation and recognition of competencies

- Concentrating on marketing is highly important. With regard to marketing, the relationship between providers and companies is the most problematic.
- Collection of practical examples should be built up on individual, organisational and systemic levels. Research into the practical 'ups and downs' of APL & VPL and its follow-up projects are definitely also needed here.
- Macro level: the motivational role of government and social partners has been far from exhausted. More stimulus should be created in legislation, financial arrangements and regulations.
- Educational awareness should be raised in an organisation or company.
- Prepare different scenarios to encompass the diversity of goals VPL face. There are 4 main goals aiming at qualification, empowerment (upgrade), employability (update, HRD) or personal career goals.
- Information provision must be made crystal clear to the individual employee or job-seeker. Of course all of this is highly dependent on the scenario chosen for the use of VPL.
- Self-management of competencies 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.

Phase 2: Recognition of competencies

- A candidate must work with a clear portfolio, with/without support from the HR-department.
- Training-programmes for self-management of competencies must be offered to those who are or have to be made aware that is not only vital but also enjoyable to invest in themselves.
- Setting standards involves the selection of a standard or benchmark by the candidate, with or without the assistance of a portfolio-guider. The standard to be chosen is dependent on the scenario or learning highway that is relevant.
- The accessibility of a chosen standard or benchmark is extremely important in taking the first step in the candidate's self-management.

Phase 3: Accreditation or Validation of competencies

- National coverage of the VPL advisory function: more transparency, uniformity, harmonisation and collaboration are needed at national level to strengthen the effects of VPL.
- Linkage of competency systems: it is advisable to be able to match competency profiles from corporate and educational systems. VPL is the bridge then.
- VPL procedures must take place independent of training-programmes. Otherwise, the learner can never be sure of the necessity of the learning offer.
- No distinction between diploma's acquired on the basis of formal and on the basis of non-formal learning is desirable. It rules out stigmatisation of a specific type of learning.
- VPL should be possible at Masters level, because even academic competencies can be acquired in non-formal learning settings.

Phase 4: Further development of competencies

- Companies have to facilitate and in particular provide guidance in workbased learning. Education must value the workplace as a rich learning environment.

- Employees need to be self-managed in 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 (*empowerment*) and 0% (*pampering*).

Phase 5: Anchoring VPL

- Organisations must ensure that their formulation of demands is effective. Formulation of demands means that there is clarity concerning (1) the competencies present within the organisation, and (2) the required competencies within the framework of the organisational aims. A match can be made between 1 and 2, so that (3) the competency demands within the organisation and ultimately (4), an action plan for the validation and development of available competencies, as well as those that need to be developed, emerges.
- 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: there must be a greater integration of VPL into HR policy and practice, aimed at enhancing employability and mobility, increasing voluntary participation and working towards achievable goals.

Conclusions: mutual learning points

- a. Put the individual learner with her/his portfolio in the position of co-makership
- b. Focus on learning outcomes instead of learning-input
- c. The total VPL-process is portfolio-based; i.e. recognition, accreditation and development. So make sure the bottom-up process of RPL is as well organized as the top-down process of APL.
- d. Make sure the standards for qualification and/or competence-management are transparent and interchangeable. EQF offers good reference material to set up levels in standards.
- e. Competency-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.
- f. Lifelong learning is about stimulating the learning triangle: individual (portfolio-build up), organisation (competence-based HRM) and education (output-oriented, learning-made-to-measure).

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The dimensions of APL in the Netherlands

A general description of system- and procedural requirements

Source: Werkgroep EVC (2000) *The Glass is half full!*. The Hague: Ministry of Economic Affairs.
Notwithstanding the age of this policy paper, the description of the dimensions of APL still stands the test of accuracy and modernity.

Accreditation of Prior Learning consists of many elements or dimensions. These dimensions can be subdivided into system requirements and procedural requirements. Each dimension attributes its own responsibilities to individuals, organisations, the government or the social partners.

System requirements

The system requirements are the prerequisites and facilities that must be present at macroeconomic level in order for prior learning assessment to be optimally used. The responsibilities of the various players and the (existing) development level differ for each requirement.

The successful application of prior learning assessment depends on various prerequisites:

- 1 The presence of assessment facilities
- 2 A high level of accessibility to the procedure
- 3 A system for quality assurance of the assessment procedures
- 4 A workable assessment standard (= the “yardstick” by which an assessment is made)
- 5 A stimulating financial and legal framework
- 6 A supportive national and international framework
- 7 The ability to measure feasibility and profitability

Procedure

As a procedure for individual use, prior learning assessment can be subdivided into a number of logical successive steps. Responsibility for completing these stages lies primarily with the individual. However, occasionally it can also be the responsibility of a company or other organisation to take into account what is required on the labour market.

In procedural terms, prior learning assessment involves the following steps:

- 8 Defining the goals of prior learning assessment
- 9 Generating support and raising awareness
- 10 Preparing the prior learning assessment procedure (general)
- 11 Preparing the prior learning assessment procedure (individual)
- 12 Evaluation (assessment)
- 13 Development (advisory and follow-on phase)

SYSTEM requirements

1. Assessment

Assessment is a method for identifying personal growth and development opportunities. Information about existing skills and qualifications is gathered in a controlled and standardised way. Based on the results of this inventory, advice is then offered about possible follow-on steps to bring about further development.

In order to optimally develop prior learning assessment as an instrument to boost employability, the assessment procedure will need to be a low threshold facility.

Every organisation is in principle free to establish and offer an assessment facility. However, if the assessment is used to guide a recognisable civil effect, then the assessment must be carried out independently *and* be subjected to a quality control system.

Acquiring externally legitimised certificates and diplomas based on the national qualification standards is currently effectively tied to institutions for (secondary) professional education. By training and evaluating, and/or by unlinking the award of certificates and diplomas from formal channels, it will be possible to establish independent assessment centres.

Assessors carry out the evaluation and recognition of skills and qualifications. The legitimisation of providing assessment facilities depends on the quality of the assessors who are available. So far, there have been no quality criteria, or a qualification standard, for assessors who are implementing prior learning assessment procedures.

2. Accessibility

Prior learning assessment procedures should be accessible for individuals and organisations (on or around the labour market). The concept of accessibility relates to:

- Recognition and acceptance
- The accessibility of organisations that carry out the assessment procedures
- The affordability of procedures

The acceptance of the importance and the profitability of prior learning assessment as a facility will be assisted by the optimum accessibility and availability of procedures, including both the physical accessibility and the financial accessibility of procedures.

Accessibility is also increased if the value of certificates and hence the value of the standard applied is cross-branch in nature. For example, a certificate awarded on the basis of a standard applied by the retail trade will also have to have some value within the care sector or the automobile industry. Essentially, it is a matter of increasing the transparency and comparability of the various qualification structures.

A decentralised provision of assessment will increase the accessibility of the procedure. 'Decentralised' in this context means the regional spread and implementation of the procedure in the workplace and the place of learning of the candidate. Another prerequisite for accessibility is practicability and efficiency for users. Time-consuming and bureaucratic procedures are disastrous for accessibility.

State co-funding of prior learning assessment procedures is a fundamental prerequisite for ensuring access to, and the successful application of, the system. A decentralised and practicable system, which is too costly for users, will reduce access to procedures.

3. Quality assurance

Quality assurance relates to the validity of the standard applies, the quality and accreditation of assessors and the quality assurance system for assessment provisions.

Because rights can be derived from the award of certificates and diplomas on the basis of the procedure, professional and complaints procedures will need to be formulated – in other words, a nationally implemented prior learning assessment system based on a properly coordinated and cohesive system of quality assurance that applies to all the assessment centres.

The government is responsible for the quality assurance of the assessment standard that is applied in the case of prior learning assessment. The quality of the standard can be guided by establishing procedures for developing standards and by applying a programme of requirements

to the structure of the standard. Important quality criteria include validity, acceptance, reproducibility, functionality, transparency and comparability of structures.

There are various important players involved in assessing the quality of prior learning assessment. The government must supervise this quality (validity, reliability and legitimacy). It can delegate this responsibility to third parties, but remains liable for the overall supervision of quality.

This quality assurance can take the form of a system of audits of internal quality care systems for assessment centres, or a system of random studies by independent research institutes to study the validity and reliability of assessment results. Another possibility is the accreditation of assessors.

In tandem with the unlinking of training and assessment, as described under dimension 1, provision must also be made for the quality assurance of the aforesaid assessment centres, even if they are not operating within the quality frameworks of state-funded education. This can be done via the accreditation of assessors.

4. Standard

When developing the prior learning assessment system, efforts must be made to tie it in with the national qualification structures for professional education. This will provide the greatest possible guarantee for the civil effect of the qualifications acquired via prior learning assessment. A civil effect can range from the right to access and/or exemptions for a particular training course, the award of certificates or diplomas and follow-on phases in the context of careers development.

Recognition of skills and qualifications can be based on the qualification structures of sectors and branches or on internal (company) standards. In the first case, the capacity for adjusting the standards will be an important prerequisite for acceptance of, and support for, the standard. The feedback function of procedures for the capacity to adjust the standards is of immense importance here. In order to utilise this function, agreements must be made between assessors and the bodies responsible for developing the national qualification standards. In the case of internal standards, the civil effect is not a main priority. Internal standards should be coordinated as far as possible with national standards in order to assist employability.

It is important for the standard applied to be demand-led. The need for skills and qualifications on the labour market must be the point of departure for developing the standard. The incorporation of so-called informally acquired skills and qualifications can therefore only be to the good. As a result, if there are follow-on phases after assessment, this can ensure a good match between education/training and the labour market. It may well be useful to re-incorporate the existing qualification structure in a national skills and qualifications structure for professional education.

5. Financial and legal framework

The financial and legal framework must support the system. Financial and legal obstacles must not hamper the development and application of the system; on the contrary - prior learning assessment should in fact provide a financial and legal incentive for learning, notably in terms of its flexibility and dynamism.

Concluding agreements at branch level about the ways in which people can obtain access to assessment is clearly important for prior learning assessment. Such agreements could be set down in collective labour agreements (CAOs) in terms of the spending of available training budgets. Another possibility is to offer a tax facility for implementing assessments for careers guidance.

The award of exemptions and credits based on work experience should also be given attention. Not only does this require the active deployment of prior learning assessment but it is also an incentive for 'lifelong learning in work'.

The establishment of a prior learning assessment system involves development and maintenance costs. Experiences in other countries show that these systems can ultimately pay for themselves, thanks to tax facilities that encourage investment in employability. It should be noted that the government will continue to have a responsibility for the participation of job-seekers in prior learning assessment.

6. National and international developments and knowledge

In terms of knowledge, for prior learning assessment it is crucial to organise the knowledge flow that is required to keep it as a system up to date. The exchange of knowledge is the key prerequisite here. The aim is to avoid having to duplicate effort and to be able instead to learn from others, both nationally and internationally.

At national and international level, platforms for the ongoing supply of knowledge will need to ensure the generation of new insights and innovation, measurement techniques, IT applications and so on. Prior learning assessment could also be used to encourage the recognition of international diplomas. Within the various platforms, knowledge will be exchanged between participants from various countries. Obviously these platforms should preferably be organised via the Internet as far as possible.

7. Feasibility and profitability measurement

In order to more effectively highlight the benefits of the system for everyone, it is important to be able to clearly indicate its workability and profitability in various situations.

Prior learning assessment as an instrument must lead to an accessible structure in which more attention is given to the qualities that people already have. This structure applies to all the different forms of organisation that are active on the labour market, to suppliers of training courses, to assessment providers, to careers advisory bodies and to individuals.

The results of the application of prior learning assessment must ultimately be visible in, say, increased assessment for careers planning or personal development and, proceeding on from this, in a more effective application of the available resources for education and training. The provision of a customised service to individuals will also rise sharply.

Measurable effects will include a rise in the number of diplomas, certificates and other qualifications awarded on the strength of procedures. The visible return for individuals and organisations of investing in human capital must also be properly measurable.

The other results of application include a reduction in the dropout rate in education and a higher rate of successful labour market reintegration, an increase in the 'sideways' inflow onto the labour market, increased mobility of workers and an increase in the successful placement of job seekers.

APL as a procedure

8. Defining the goal of prior learning assessment as an instrument

The recognition of skills and qualifications can serve several goals. These can range from the evaluation of work activities based on specific standards to the development of personal development plans. Depending on the aims involved, the most relevant assessment standard and assessment procedures are then applied.

9. Generating support among stakeholders (raising awareness)

The business of implementing procedures, whatever the goal, stands or falls depending on the support of stakeholders. Procedures do after all place considerable demands on the personal

commitment of the individuals concerned. The realisation of procedures requires insight into, and acceptance of, the importance of skills development and skills evaluation. The provision of public information concerning the importance of employability, goals and the practical elaboration of procedures must generate support among the stakeholders. The importance of active support from line managers, senior management and employee associations within companies and institutions should not be underestimated. For job seekers, the recognition of skills and qualifications has a value in itself, but benefit agencies must also reflect this value in terms of a real improvement in their opportunities on the labour market.

10. Preparation of the procedure

An assessment standard is developed, based on the goal selected. We can broadly define two types of goals and standards: national recognition based on nationally accepted standards, and company-related recognition based on company standards. If the goal is the recognition of skills and qualifications for the external labour market, sector or branch-specific standards are applied, such as the qualification structure for professional education or standards that have been drawn up by branch and professional organisations. For skills and qualifications at higher education level, use can be made of final qualifications for courses or of standards that have been established by professional associations or branch organisations. When opting for externally recognised standards, we will have to constantly assess to what extent the standard is recognised on the labour market. In the case of national recognition, collaboration will also have to be sought with an institution that has the authority to award certificates and diplomas.

For certificates and diplomas which are not included in the national qualification structure for professional education, for example for new or specific skills and qualifications and professional groups and for skills and qualifications at higher education level, such a provision does not yet exist.

If the goal is recognition at company level, company-related standards can be used, such as job and skills profiles or role descriptions.

11. Preparation of individual participants

Individual candidates prepare themselves for the procedure by taking stock of their individual skills and qualifications and ordering these skills. Professional education bodies and companies currently use portfolio models or other models for the personal inventory of skills and qualifications. The specific characteristic of portfolios is that they formulate (learning and work) experiences in terms of the skills and qualifications cited in assessment standards. Due to this link to skills and qualification standards, these models distinguish themselves from the regular curriculum vitae and form the basis for comparing skills and qualifications with recognised standards. Another difference from the CV is the documentary evidence for the skills and qualifications acquired, which is stored in the portfolio.

In the case of portfolio development and especially when describing skills and qualifications on the basis of criteria from the standard applied, most candidates will need some form of supervision.

Apart from assisting with the inventory of experience and the collection of documentary evidence of skills, this supervision will also focus on the provision of information about the assessment procedure. Certain candidates who have been out of the education process for some time and find exams problematical could perceive the procedure as a traditional form of examination. The resistance that this could engender will deprive such candidates of confidence in the procedure, even if the procedure is carried out at their own place of work and they are required to do no more than simply demonstrate their own regular working procedures.

12. Evaluation: assessment

The procedure is primarily geared to finding out what skills and qualifications a candidate has:

“How full is the glass?” This procedure takes a range of forms. The key feature however is that recognition must always focus on the candidate’s proof that he or she has acquired certain skills and qualifications. The candidate can provide this proof by demonstrating these skills and qualifications in his or her work (authentic assessment on the shop floor). The assessors can also hold supplementary interviews on the basis of assessment forms. Alternatively, the candidate may provide proof in the form of testimonies, programmes of courses that he has attended or company training courses, or in the form of the results of work carried out previously, as reflected in testimonies, photographs or reports.

Once the quality of the work demonstrated and other forms of proof have been assessed, the assessor makes a judgement about the demand for the skills and qualifications shown, or states whether the proof of skills meets the required standard.

If an externally recognised standard is being used, then certificates with national validity are awarded for a specific sector or branch. If there is an internal company standard, then the recognition is expressed in terms of company-related certificates.

13. Development

The procedure is geared towards employability. This means that once recognition has been given, things must move forward. After all, the aim is to ensure that the procedure should not merely establish how full the glass is, but also that the glass is constantly being topped up. This implies that advice about careers initiatives, for example in the form of a personal development plan, should form an integral part of a procedure. In this way, prior learning assessment will contribute to the articulation of the demand and need for training.

The procedure will also provide important information about the quality of the assessment standard. After all, if a larger number of assessments show that the skills requirements cited in the standard do not tie in with the requirements made in professional practice, then the conclusion should not be that the candidates do not have the required skills and qualifications. On the contrary - the conclusion should be that the qualification standard being used does not adequately reflect the skills requirements demanded in professional practice.

Selfmanagement of competencies

Self-assessment of competencies is the crucial element in the process of EVC because without this a person can only partially become co-maker of his/her personal development.

There are different instruments available for this kind of self-assessment, for instance the Swiss *CH-Q* instrument. (*CH-Q* = Schweizer Qualificationsbuch; Schuur, et al, 2003). It is an integral system for valuing prior learning. It consists of a broad package of services: portfolio, (self-) assessment, career-planning, action-planning, quality-control and accompanying training programmes.

In general tools like *CH-Q* aim at personal development or career-planning in training and profession 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-makship by:

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

What is *CH-Q*?

CH-Q is the name of an integral concept for the recognition of acquired competencies in Switzerland. It consists of a wide package of different services in the entire chain of VPL: portfolio, assessment, career formation, quality assurance and accompanying trainings programs. The 'Qualificationsbuch' is the read thread in the chain of the services.

The target of *CH-Q* is twofold: (1) the individual development or career formation in training and occupation and (2) the development of the flexibility and mobility of that individual on the job market.

CH-Q addresses with that emphatic on:

- To provide the basis for a goal-directed development and career planning,
- The stimulation of personal development,
- The support of self managed learning and acting,
- To stimulate young and adults to document continuously their professional- and personal development continuous

CH-Q addresses with this a wide public: youngsters, starters, adults, re-entering; in short, everybody regardless of origin, training, occupation or social position.

The 'Qualificationsbuch'

The qualification book is an open, individual folder. It forms the red thread through the whole system of *CH-Q* because this is the personal development plan. Each action of the individual will be written down and prepared.

The general idea behind the use of the qualification book is: to become conscious of your own, present competencies (knowledge, abilities, skills and attitude) and to keep on ordering, writing down and proving these in accordance with your – whether or not changing - professional and personal situation. Profession and profession-crossing competencies are weighed equal, also those from volunteer work for instance. Existing differences between different target groups in occupational life are taken away by the logical appreciation of all kinds of competencies. The users of the qualification book themselves can decide when they use the documents that they have documented in their own 'book', for applying to a job, career formation or to formulate the learning path for further development.

Program for personal career development

The 'Qualificationsprogram' can serve several goals:

- To deepen activities using the qualification book towards a desired or obligatory (new) level,
- In the professional building, as well within as outside business training or continuing training,
- By the integration of difficult learning, school dropouts and jobseekers.

For this personal program different type of support can be used. Specialists, teachers from vocational and secondary education, counsellors from regional department of employment and others receive special schooling to support the activities in the program.

History and points of departure

The project began in 1993 with the motion of Member of Parliament Jufith Stamm on basis of action from women and training circles. Main issue was a transparent system for training and retraining in which everybody would have equal chances for development. The instrument of the acknowledgement of acquired competencies would have an effective, binding role between personal learning and the offer of formal, non-formal and informal learning. First consideration was the conviction that the employment chances for women and men effective could be supported and expanded through increased transparency between training and education and the labour market on basis of VPL.

Result of the motion was the start of the national project titled CH-Q. The original initiating organisations (women organisation and employment offices) were in charge. The project management consists of representatives of initiating organizations, the authorities and of the social partners. The project started in 1995.

Since the summer of 1997 CH-Q also develops instruments and procedures to assess competencies and to validate them. CH-Q also evaluates national and international developments and the different quality standards that are in use.

The Swiss 'qualification book'

Content and application

The use of the Swiss qualification book encompass all steps that the individual can undertake for furtherer development in training and profession, from the description of the actual starting position till the determination of the competencies already present to obtain the training and career goals. It is in fact an open and accessible frame for formulating and executing a personal development plan, a PDP; a person can work on his/her PDP individually, independently or in consultation with the organisation in which that individual is active.

The qualification book is subdivided in three chapters:

- a. Personal development
- b. Determine and proof of the present competencies
- c. Planning and realisation of further development

Concerning the personal development working with the qualification book means that the individual can make concrete choices over his/her own career (professional and social). It is about someone gets insight in the important stages of their own story of life and the professional, personal and knowledge development.

Who can bring about a connection between its personal experiences and the occupation development, can also draw conclusions from him-/herself, e.g. strengthen of the strong side or develop the weak side. Point of departure of this chapter is that, if someone has insight in his/her own learning capacities, he/she also is able (or can be enabled) to draw their personal learning path.

Determining of acquired competencies

Most of the work of the qualification book goes into describing as well possible the competencies that someone has and the search to the associated qualifications.

The determination of the actual qualifications has been spread over seven domains:

- a. Education (traditional, formal)

- b. Training (non-formal, on the job)
- c. Activities within the profession
- d. Activities in the private situation
- e. Volunteer work
- f. Leisure activity
- g. Particular occupational and life situations

The work of organising and evaluating the qualifications has been standardised in order to get a balance between all domains. It encompasses the four competence domains:

- a. Professional competencies
- b. Personal competencies
- c. Social competencies
- d. System (Method) competencies

An important part of the qualification book is the so-called qualification balance. This 'balance' can be used to get an overview of the correct balance of (still) required training and education and a specific career step. For this balance most of the important qualifications within the seven qualification domains are briefly defined. On basis of that someone puts together a qualification profile, for instance if one wants to apply for a particular job, for further training or other purposes.

Composition of the proof

In the qualification book all personal proof of competencies that is considered by the individual as of interest, no matter in which way, is collected and organized by the individual. The most important motto is: "Collect all documents of acquired competencies/qualifications within and outside your occupational practice." Beside certificates of work relations and diploma's, it also can be for instance a project description of an association's initiative, messages from the media about managerial positions, certificates/ affirmations of volunteer work, a final assignment of a course, the personal evaluation of a course leader; affirmation of regular neighbour help, etc.

Planning and realization of the furtherer development

This chapter is directed to the future planning and the realization of the desired training and professional aims. The design of concrete career steps or further training must correspond with their professional and life reality. This requires the realistic search into the possibilities and determining the targets. This chapter provides the building stones for that

Determination of the action plan

In accordance with the aims (comparable with the PDP) the users define an action plan, that gives answers to the questions such as 'what to do?' 'how?' and 'with whom?'. By the starting the plan the qualification book can have different functionalities:

- a. As basis for the job seeker: life story and letter of application can precisely be matched to the personal profile
- b. As pieces of evidences for continuation training: the demonstrated qualifications can be recognized and contribute to a abbreviation of the training time.
- c. As basis for promotion: as proof of the achievements on which promotion can be based.
- d. For getting a (more) appropriate volunteer job
- e. Documentation as input for a professional and career advice

The Swiss qualification program for a career

Next to the acknowledgement of qualifications within and outside the profession and the concrete activation of the personal development, CH-Q concentrates also on the support of a personal application: the support of people who would like to work on their own qualification book.

The career program has been put together from a number of learning units that in education or courses, or in special trainings program's for particular organizations or region's has been integrated. They have been adapted according to the supplier and to the domain in which it is

used. Content, the way it is offered and the work method are thus addressed towards the needs of the target groups.

Suppliers of the CH-Q model are organizations that independently can/may carry out the qualification declaration and evaluation:

- a. Through the state recognized institutions
- b. Through branch organizations certified institutions
- c. Through institutes and branch organisations qualified suppliers.

For the transfer of the CH-Q program as whole and the guidance while working with the qualification book professionals have been assigned, who have participated in the CH-Q trainings program for supporting persons. This training is meant for persons that have the responsibility through personnel and/or training/education management. Thus, for persons that in the frame of career formation possesses:

- a. A professional competence (teacher, educator, psychologist active in occupation mediation and adult education, e. a.)
- b. An educational experience
- c. The possibility to transfer the offer of CH-Q to the basic principles and guidelines in the own field of work or domain.