Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning in The Netherlands

Final version, One-off report

Colofon

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Acknowledgements

The 2012 Recommendation Member States agreed to put validation arrangements in place by 2018, allowing individuals to obtain a qualification (or parts of a qualification) based on validated knowledge, skills, and competences. Following the AG41-5 note, this one-off report is composed to overview the current situation in the validation of non-formal and informal learning in the Netherlands. The concrete aims of presenting the one-off report to the EQF-AG are[[1]](#footnote-2):

* to inform the EQF-AG on the experiences of setting up and implementing national validation practices, including factors that have facilitated validation and difficulties encountered;
* to present concrete practical examples of validation arrangements that are interesting to share with the EQF-AG;
* to receive constructive feedback from the EQF-AG that can support validation at a national level;
* to highlight issues requiring further reflection and peer learning (obstacles to validation; issues requiring further knowledge);
* to enable a wider discussion amongst peers on how to best implement the Recommendation, at both national and European level.

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Terminology

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *CREBO standards* | The CREBO standard (EQF/NLQF level 1 - 4) is an educational standard connected to vocational education (VET) and managed by the Foundation for Professional and Business (SBB).  |
| *CROHO standards* | The CROHO standard is an educational standard used in higher education (EQF/NLQF level 5 – 8). CROHO standards are managed by DUO, part of Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.  |
| *Education institutions* | Institutions where formal and non-formal education is provided. |
| *Education track* | One of the two pathways for VNFIL. |
| *EVC* | EVC is in Dutch *‘erkennen van verworven competenties’.* In English *Recognition of Acquired Competences*. EVC is an instrument used as a validation tool in the labour market track to get recognition of acquired competences. |
| *EQF* | The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is a common European reference framework whose purpose is to make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and (education) systems.  |
| *Formal education*  | Formal education is aimed to obtain a diploma recognized by the government. Education is organized by formal education institutions.  |
| *Formal learning* | Formal learning is always organised and structured with learning objectives. The individual is aware of the learning objectives in order to gain new knowledge, skills, and competences. |
| *Formal qualification* | A qualification regulated by law of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. This includes qualifications in secondary education, secondary vocational education, higher education, and adult education. |
| *Informal learning* | Informal learning refers to learning by experience or just as experience. Informal learning is never organised, has no set of objectives in terms of learning outcomes. |
| *Inspectorate of Education*  | The inspectorate of Education has been appointed by the government to supervise the quality of primary, secondary and VET education. |
| *Labour market track* | One of the two pathways for VNFIL. |
| *Learning outcomes* | Description of what someone knows and can do upon completion of the learning process leading to the qualification. |
| *LLD (lifelong development)*  | LLD means that individuals continue to challenge themselves in lifelong development by pursuing an education or course at whatever point they are in their career. This also includes personal development. So, with or without prior education: starters, re-starters and people integrating. LLD may or may not lead to a diploma. |
| *Ministry of Education, Culture and Science* | The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, is the department of the government, responsible for the quality assurance of the education track. |
| *National Coordination point (NCP) NLQF* | The National Coordination Point (NCP) NLQF is responsible for classifying non-formal qualifications into a NLQF and EQF level. The NCP NLQF is an independent body however it is facilitated by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.  |
| *National Knowledge Centre VPL*  | The National Knowledge Centre VPL provides quality assurance for the VPL procedures in the labour market track. |
| *NLQF* | Dutch Qualifications Framework. |
| *Non-formal education* | Non-formal education is a short training, workshop, or business course. These are not government-funded and do not lead to a formal diploma. |
| *Non-formal learning* | Non-formal learning is referred to education that is not regulated by an education law. |
| *Non-formal qualification* | A qualification associated with a non-formal training that has been classified into an NLQF and EQF level by the National Coordination Point NLQF. |
| *NVAO (The Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organization)* | The Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organization is an independent quality assurance organization that guarantees the quality of higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders. It accredits existing and new programs and assesses the quality assurance of higher education institutions. |
| *Qualification* | A qualification is described in learning outcomes. A qualification is the result of a validated assessment process conducted by a competent authority, which determines that the learning outcomes meet predefined standards. |
| *Qualification level* | Levels of learning outcomes described in the EQF and NLQF in terms of knowledge, skills, independence and responsibility. |
| *Validation* | Validation aims to make non-formal and informal learning visible, in the education and training system, based on the identification, documentation, assessment and certification of such learning. |
| *VNFIL (validation of non-formal and informal learning)* | Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) is defined as ‘a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard’. Validation aims to make non-formal and informal learning visible, in the labour market and in education and training systems, based on the identification, documentation, assessment and certification of such learning. |
| *VPL (validation prior learning)* | The term Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) means validating learning outcomes related to the labour market. VPL is the broader perspective on validation which we use as term for validation in the labour market track. |
| *VPL procedure* | The VPL procedure followed to obtain recognition of acquired competences in the labour market track. This term is only used in the labour market track. |
| *VPL provider* | A VPL provider is a recognized agency that carries out validation of prior learning procedures. VPL providers need to meet the quality requirements set by the National Knowledge Centre VPL. |

# Introduction

This one-off report aims to present a clear picture of the current situation of Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL) in The Netherlands. The report describes an overview of what has been achieved so far in the Dutch system of VNFIL. Chapter one explains the concepts of formal, non-formal, and informal learning and lifelong development in the context of the Netherlands. Chapter two describes the phases and history of the validation system in the Netherlands. Chapter three describes more in-depth validation at the individual level. It gives an overview of how validation for individuals is organized and how individuals are supported by running through the validation procedures. In chapters four and five the general features of the labour market track and education track are explained. In both chapters, the responsibilities of stakeholders, quality assurance and funding are described. In chapter six an insight is given in the current results of VNFIL by describing practical examples. Chapter seven gives an overview of the current impact of VNFIL in the Netherlands. To conclude, we present the main challenges for the near future.

In the Netherlands, all kinds of terms are used for validation. In this report, we use the terms VNFIL, VPL and validation (Figure 1). VNFIL is general applied in the context of education and labour market. When we talk about VNFIL in the labour market we use the term VPL. VPL is validation to achieve an assessment report. When we talk about VNFIL in education, we talk about validation. Validation to achieve exemption and customization towards a diploma.



*Figure 1.*

## Formal, non-formal and informal learning

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is defined as ‘a process of confirmation by an authorized body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard’. Validation aims to make non-formal and informal learning visible, in the labour market and in education and training systems, based on the identification, documentation, assessment and certification of such learning. Validation has the potential to contribute to achieving the goals set by the Europe 2020 strategy, as it can contribute to matching skills supply and demand, supporting mobility across sectors and countries and fighting social exclusion (Cedefop, 2020).

A distinction can be made in formal, non-formal and informal learning in the Netherlands. *Formal learning* is always organized and structured with learning objectives. The individual is aware of the learning objectives to gain new knowledge, skills, and competences (OECD, 2017). Formal education in the Netherlands is a learning pathway regulated by education laws. A formal qualification is linked to a formal education program and for which an NLQF/EQF level has been rewarded. Formal qualifications are regulated by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

*Non-formal learning* is the concept on which there is the least consensus. The wide variety of approaches makes consensus even more difficult. Nevertheless, for the majority it seems clear that *non-formal learning* is rather organised and can have learning objectives (OECD, 2017). In the Netherlands *non-formal learning* is referred to education that is not regulated by education laws. A non-formal qualification is linked to non-formal training and for which an NLQF/EQF level can be rewarded by the National Coordination Point NLQF. A non-formal qualification does not lead to a national diploma or certificate recognised by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, but it can lead to a diploma or certificate that is recognised by a sector. Non-formal qualifications are often offered by private education providers, but also, for example, by VET and Higher education institutions in their market-oriented education department.

*Informal learning* refers to learning by experience or just as experience. Informal learning is never organised, has no set of objectives in terms of learning outcomes. Non-formal and informal learning are the most important ways of learning in adulthood (Figure 2). In the Netherlands, informal learning is the dominant type of learning after the age of 25 (OECD, 2017).

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Figure 2: Retrieved from OECD, 2017

## Lifelong development (LLD) in the Netherlands

VNFIL takes place in the context of LLD. LLD stands for lifelong development, meaning that an individual continues to challenge themselves in lifelong development by pursuing an education or course at any point in their career. In 2018, more than 1.7 million Dutch people between the age of 25 and 65 (over 19%) participated in an education or course. Almost 1.4 million people participated in non-formal training courses (CBS, 2019). In the Netherlands, the private training sector for (young) adults has a long tradition. Their roots in business have been a welcome addition to government-funded education (formal learning) for decades. Private trainers provide education for 85% of the 1.7 million adults who attend training annually (CBS, 2019). The combined turnover of the private industry is € 3.4 billion (SEO, 2018).

Participation in LLD increased between 2006 and 2018 (Figure 3). The European target for participation in LLD is 15% in 2020. The Netherlands performs well and has reached a 19% in participation in education and training. Nevertheless, the country lags behind Scandinavian countries and Switzerland. The national target of 20% by 2020 has not yet been reached. The low influx of adults in formal higher education could contribute to the failure of achieving the set percentage. In 2016 only 9% of adults participated in higher formal education (Eurostat, 2016). This percentage excludes students who continue their studies after secondary education. Participation in training in the Netherlands mainly concerns short-term, job-oriented training and the Netherlands scores poorly in terms of participation in longer-term (formal) training. In formal higher education, older students (age 25 or older) account for only 5% of new entrants at the bachelor’s level – one of the lowest shares among OECD countries. In contrast, the share of older new entrants was 40% in short-cycle programmes, above the OECD median, and 33% in master's programmes, close to the OECD median. The “one bachelor’s, one master’s policy”, a rule that higher education students who already have a degree at the level where they are studying pay higher tuition fees, could partly explain the low share of older students at the bachelor’s level. Bachelor’s programmes are at least three years long, so the prospect of paying high tuition fees for several consecutive years may discourage second-time enrolment, which typically would be most likely for older adults (25 years old and over). In addition, students entering their programme after the age of 30 are not eligible for student financial assistance in the Netherlands, which can create a barrier to participation in lifelong development (OECD, 2019).

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*Figure 3: Retrieved from Eurostat, 2019*

Participation in LLD differs considerably between groups. For example, 26% of highly educated people participate in lifelong development, compared to 18% for those with a secondary education level and 9% for those with a low education level background. As age progresses, there is a decrease in training participation. Of the 25-34 age group, 29% had received training in the previous four weeks. In the 55-64 age group, this is only 12%. One of five working adults has never followed a training or course during their career (ROA, 2014). This mainly concerns low-skilled employees and employees in the catering, trade, and culture sectors. Employees in SMEs, people with a flexible employment contract, self-employed and part-timers also participate relatively less in training and retraining in contrary to employees of large organizations or with a permanent employment contract. For workers, approximately 90% of the total 'learning time' happens in the workplace. The workplace is therefore potentially an important learning environment.

## Qualifications and standards

This report focuses on the VNFIL of the individual, but we also want to briefly highlight the aspects of qualifications, learning outcomes and standards.

A qualification is described in learning outcomes and is the result of a validated assessment process conducted by a competent authority, which determines that the learning outcomes meet predefined standards. Qualifications are used as a yardstick in formal, non-formal and informal learning (Figure 4). Qualifications and classifying qualifications into levels can contribute to making learning outcomes visible and contribute to the validation of non-formal and formal learning.



Figure 4.

Standards

National qualifications standards are used. In education, there are two educational standards used: CREBO and CROHO. CREBO is connected to vocational education (VET) and managed by the Foundation for Professional and Business (SBB). CROHO standards are managed by DUO, part of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

CREBO and CROHO standards can be offered through government-funded and non-government-funded education. Both CREBO and CROHO standards are connected to the Dutch Qualification Framework NLQF.

In the labour market track professional- and industry, and education standards are in general used. Professional- and industry standards are standards developed by professional and industry organizations and supported by the sectoral social partners (employer and employee organizations). The development of professional/industry standards takes place when there is a need in the labour market for such a standard, in order to determine whether an individual is competent and employable.

Qualifications (NLQF/EQF)

The Netherlands Qualification Framework (NLQF) contributes to the transparency between non-formal qualifications (labour market) and formal qualifications (education). The NLQF levels give an insight at what level an individual can perform in term of knowledge and skills. The levels of qualifications are determined by descriptions in learning outcomes of what an individual can perform in terms of knowledge, skills and competences after a learning process has been completed. The NLQF consists of an Entry Level followed by 8 levels: Level 1 the least complex and Level 8 the most complex one (see figure 5).



Figure 5: Dutch Qualifications Framework (NLQF)

In 2011 the Dutch Qualifications Framework has been adopted by the government. Since that time formal qualifications have been linked to NLQF levels. Since 2012 the National Coordination Point (NCP) is responsible for the classification of non-formal qualifications into one of the levels of NLQF/EQF. Private sector/education organizations can apply for classification of their non-regulated qualifications into one of the NLQF-levels. Via the NCP NLQF, non-formal qualifications can be linked to NLQF levels based on learning outcomes. This makes qualifications (which are used as a yardstick in a VPL procedure), comparable in terms of levels. Classification of qualifications, based on learning outcomes makes it less relevant where you have acquired these competences and skills (learning path independence).

Another option is The European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training, often referred to as ECVET. ECVET is a technical framework for the transfer, recognition and (where appropriate) accumulation of individuals’ learning outcomes with a view of achieving a qualification. The ECVET units are parts of a full qualification and by the accumulation of the units a full qualification can be obtained. However, an evaluation has shown that this instrument is not widely applied in practice and that a European credit system as developed for higher education (ECTS) has not emerged for vocational education.

# Phases of VNFIL in The Netherlands

## 1998 - 2006

The discussion about LLD started as early as 1990, the Rauwenhoff Commission gave advice to our government to interact better/to improve the bridge and narrowing the gap between education and the labour market. To promote the awareness, the European Commission started in 1996 the Year of Lifelong Learning. In the Netherlands it was leading to "the Knowledge Debate" and the National Action Program "Lifelong Learning", with actions for increasing the so-called employability of people and a re-orientation of the regular education system (Hooge, 2020). The national system for validation of non-formal and informal learning started in 1998. The government introduced a national action programme on Lifelong development: “*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 lifelong development by setting up a system by which knowledge acquired elsewhere (that is, outside of the educational system) can be tested and accredited." (VPL Biennale, personal communication, 2015).*

In 2000 a broad vision was implemented through the national working group VPL in the publication: “The bottle is half full” (*De fles is half vol)*. EVC is the Dutch term for *Recognition of Acquired Competences.* In this report, we will talk about the validation instrument EVC in English as VPL procedures. The formulated vision was to bridge the gap between education and the labour market. The challenge was to connect these two worlds via the learner by converting learning experiences into certificates or diplomas and by allowing the development of competences in a career context (Duvekot, 2019). VPL was seen as an instrument in the context of lifelong development and employability, to recognize prior learning formally. The starting point was that initial education is not sufficient for staying active and up to date skilled during working life. Individuals should continue to learn in formal, non-formal and informal learning processes. However, VPL should not only show the gap between what an individual is able to do and the formal qualification requirements. VPL should stimulate and promote further development of already acquired knowledge and skills. VPL is not a final goal in itself, but an instrument for the development of the individual and the improvement of ‘human capital management’ of organizations and companies (Duvekot, Maes, Pijls, & De Reus, 2007).

To support the use of VPL procedures as a validation instrument and to learn from the existing practice, the government established The National Knowledge Centre VPL (*Kenniscentrum EVC*) in 2001. The goal of the Knowledge Centre is to promote the use of validation in the labour market and to take VPL to a higher qualitative level, based on practical examples (Van den Brande, 2018; Stoel & Wentzel, 2011). The National Knowledge Centre VPL was funded from 2001 till 2016 by government.

##  2006 - 2016

Until 2006 the main objective was to encourage the use of VPL as a validation instrument in The Netherlands. In 2006 an agreement between stakeholders was signed to increase the accessibility, secure the quality, promote the use, and ensure the transparency of VPL procedures as a validation instrument. The stakeholders involved in the agreement were representatives of employers’ and workers’ organizations, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, the umbrella organizations of providers of VET and HE and representatives of the private education sector.

To monitor progress on these goals, a Quality Code VPL was developed by the stakeholders. All VPL providers in the Netherlands must comply with this code. A VPL provider is a recognized agency by the National Knowledge Centre VPL that carries out validation of prior learning procedures. VPL providers were controlled periodically by assessment agencies to receive accreditation for a specific standard.

Between 2006 and 2010 public subsidies contributed to build and push the VNFIL system in The Netherlands forward. VPL procedures have been strongly embedded in certain sectors. Almost 30% of the collective labour agreements contained agreements about the use of VPL. This does not say anything about the actual utilization, but it does say something about the potential of VPL as a validation instrument. Most VPL procedures were carried out in a limited number of domains and branches. In domains such as healthcare, technology, transport & logistics, VPL was mainly used as an instrument to demonstrate professional competence and/or to meet legal requirements (National knowledge centre VPL, 2014).

The result was a significant number of participants using the VPL validation system from 2007 to 2010. There was a lot of publicity and communication campaigns were organized. Ending the public subsidies resulted in a dropped participation in VPL participants (Table 1). Also, the economic crisis played a role due to decreased spending in training and development by private sector/industry. With the disappearance of the National Knowledge Centre VPL in 2013, the numbers of participants in VPL procedures have not been registered since then.

Table 1: Number of VPL participants over the years

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Number of VPL participants** |
| 2007 | 9 900 |
| 2008 | 12 500 |
| 2009 | 15 700 |
| 2010 | 22 000 |
| 2011 | 17 700 |
| 2012 | 14 654 |

Evaluations showed that validation through VPL was mostly used as an educational instrument: to be enrolled in educational programs, to obtain exemptions and to get diplomas. The use of VPL directly on the labour market (for career development, internal and external mobility) remained limited. A research on the effects of VPL as validation instrument for individuals and organizations (Stoel and Wentzel, 2011) showed that this instrument did have an effect on changes in tasks, mobility and income development, but only for those who obtained a formal diploma after finishing their VPL procedure (VPL Biennale, 2014).

## 2016 – till now

Many years of development, promotion and collaboration have led to many good practices, insights, and experiences regarding validation in The Netherlands. The principle of VNFIL has been embraced, the importance was recognized, but it was difficult to achieve further integration because there was still too much focus on the instruments. The value of VNFIL was still underrated compared to the value and appreciation of formal education and the acceptance of formal diplomas in society (Van den Brande, 2018; Stoel & Wentzel, 2011).

The VNFIL system has been reformed in January 2016 into two separate tracks: the labour market track and the education track. Through this change in the VNFIL system, the focus in validation was not only on VPL procedures as instrument anymore but now broader as part of the VNFIL system. The dual approach of both tracks consisted off: 1) VPL for direct use in the labour market (internal and external mobility); 2) VPL in formal education. With the introduction of the differentiation in two tracks, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science was now only responsible for the quality assurance in the education track.

1. **The labour market track.** Validation of learning outcomes for career goals related to the labour market and non-formal education (industry standards).Individuals apply for an assessment report VPL, which includes validation of Knowledge, Skills, and Competences to promote career mobility. Individuals who want to validate their non-formal and informal learning can apply for an assessment at a private VPL provider. The provider issues an assessment report VPL which the individual learner can use to prove their acquired knowledge, skills, and competences (OECD, 2017). The private market is responsible for quality assurance.
2. **The education track.** Validation of learning outcomes for career goals related to formal education (secondary vocational education and higher education diplomas). The track consists of several validation instruments to obtain a diploma in formal education (vocational- and higher education). The most significant change is that educational institutions are responsible for validating the learning outcomes. Education institutions can decide by themselves how they organise these assessments (OECD, 2017). Individuals can apply for an assessment by an educational institution where they want to follow a study. The goal for the individual is to validate their competences and skills in order to obtain a formal qualification in the most effective way by exemption of examination or reduced training programmes (Cedefop, 2019). The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is responsible for quality assurance. In adult education, flexibility and validation influence each other. When implementing flexibility in a training programme you look at the previously acquired competences. By including these competences validation takes place. This makes the system person-guided, not instrument-guided.

By introducing the two separate tracks for VPL the advantages were considered to be:

* The use of a variety of validation methods and instruments (e.g. e-portfolio) and the utilisation of more non-formal standards as VPL standards could be stronger promoted.
* Individuals who wanted to use VPL directly in the labour market, for career development and mobility, were expected to benefit from the supervision of labour market institutions, like sectorial employer organizations or social partners.
* The idea was that ownership and responsibility for the integration of VPL in HRM policies and practices could be better realized in this way, leading to a more fruitful practise of VPL in the labour market.
* One of the ideas was that by organizing VPL procedures closer to the exam committees in VET and HE, problems regarding the acceptance of the outcomes of VPL were supposed to be diminished. Therefore, it would be easier to obtain a diploma or degree in formal education, especially for adult learners.
* Educational institutes will experience more the sense of urgency and the need to provide flexible learning opportunities, tailor-made programmes to match with the capabilities and needs of learners (VPL Biennale, 2014).

With the introduction of these two tracks a clear distinction was made in the VNFIL system:

* It became easier to choose a validation instrument that fits well with specific career goals. The goals of VNFIL were clearer. If you want a diploma, then you choose the educational track. If you do not want a diploma, then you choose validation through the labour market track.
* Differentiation in external quality assurance could be ensured, so more customization was achieved in that respect as well. There was a shift of responsibility in quality assurance as the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science was now only responsible for the quality assurance in the education track. And the National Knowledge Centre VPL was now responsible for the quality assurance in the labour market track.
* The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science stopped financing the National Knowledge Centre VPL. A new national knowledge Centre VPL was created under the responsibility of the private market to promote validation in the labour market and to regulate the quality of the VPL procedures.
* The change in the VNFIL system aimed to provide better insight into the qualities of individuals and to make better use of these for the realization of their career goals. It contributed to better and sustainable employability of individuals in the labour market. The development function of validation was given a better and more effective form: it showed which knowledge and skills individuals acquired to achieve their career goals (Bussemaker, 2017).
* A covenant was agreed between the government and social partners. With the signing of a new covenant, the national government and social partners have taken the next step in consolidating VPL procedures as a labour market instrument. The covenant has the following objectives: to promote validation procedures (e.g. VPL procedures) in collective labour agreements *(cao’s)* and to make it possible that candidates with a certificate of experience have the possibility to enter an education programme.

The Netherlands is the only country in the EU in which VNFIL is separated into two tracks. In chapter 4 and 5 both pathways (labour market and education track) will be further explained. Evaluations of the two-track validation system showed that the emphasis on the importance of agreements (VPL providers and examination boards of educational institutions) was more clearly underlined. But problems regarding transferability (in the connection between both routes) were not solved, this was (and is) the result of the absence of good cooperation agreements. However, good examples of cooperation practices have emerged (e.g. VPL providers in collaboration with various educational institutions). These practical examples are described in chapter 6.

## Summary VNFIL system

The table below presents an overview of the current VNFIL system.

Table 2: Overview of VNFIL in the two tracks

|  | **Labour market track (VPL)** | **Education track (validation)** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Objective** | Validation of learning outcomes for career goals related to the labour market and non-formal education (sectoral standards). | Validation of learning outcomes for career goals related to formal education (secondary vocational education and higher education diplomas). The track consists of several validation instruments to obtain a diploma in formal education (vocational- and higher education). |
| **Stakeholders** | Social partners, national knowledge centre VPL, VPL providers, employers, and individuals | Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, Educational institutions, inspectorate, examination boards, employers, and individuals |
| **Standards** | * Sectoral standards (regulated by branch/private sector linked to NCP NLQF).
* Crebo/croho standards can be used but not entitled to exemptions
* Parts of qualification standards (ECVET)
 | * CREBO (VET education, regulated by SBB, EQF/NLQF-level 1 - 4)
* CROHO (higher education, regulated by DUO, EQF/NLQF-level 5 - 8)
 |
| **Quality assurance** | Responsibility based on Quality Code VPL conducted by:* National Knowledge Centre VPL
* Hobeon and Testudo (quality authorities)
 | Responsibility based on standards for audits WEB (legislation) conducted by:* NVAO (higher education)
* Inspectorate (VET)
 |
| **Certification** | Assessment report VPL | Exemption procedure that can lead to customization or certification in a diploma regulated by Ministry of Education, Culture and Science |
| **Funding** | Private and public financing through tax deductibility for both individuals and employers and arrangements in collective labour agreements *(cao’s)* | Regular funding through government  |

# To support individuals in validation

## The validation procedure for individuals

The 2012 Council recommendation specified four stages in the validation process: identification, documentation, assessment, and certification of learning outcomes. These four stages permit the articulation of the concept and make it easier to adapt it to different realities and individual needs. All four stages of validation are prevalent in education and training and the labour market (Cedefop, 2020). Also, in The Netherlands these four stages in the validation process are used.

**Identification**

During the identification stage, a candidate can use different methods to research future career options. The research can be self-driven or guided and gives insight into the choices someone has made in the past, what is important to someone in work and what someone wants to do in the future. It reveals the competences, skills and knowledge acquired in previous learning experiences.

**Documentation**

The results of the identification stage are documented. Examples are a CV or experience profile. A portfolio can be used as a documentation method. Evidence of previous learning experiences and competences can be collected in a portfolio. This can be the starting point of a further validation process.

**Assessment**

The collected information in the portfolios can be assessed by independent assessors to obtain validation of prior learning. Besides the portfolio, a critically guided interview or workplace visits can be used to assess the candidate.

**Certification**

Certification is the last stage. This is where the assessment has led to validation of prior learning. The result is an assessment report VPL or exemption. The educational institution where the assessment report VPL or exemption procedure is offered contributes to validation by converting (parts) of the study program into a diploma or exemption. The education institute grants exemptions or issues a diploma on the basis of the assessment VPL.

## Validation tools in the labour market track

To validate previous acquired knowledge, skills and competences different validation instruments can be used. The National Knowledge Centre VPL has made an overview of the different validation tools. Usually a mix of instruments is used in validation procedures because every situation and every individual is different.

**Identification**

* Career research

A career research is an investigation conducted independently by an individual, using a structured method. A career (self) research provides insight into the choices someone has made in the past, what is important to someone in work and what someone wants to do in future. It reveals the competences acquired in previous learning experiences and the value these competences may have for working life in the future.

* Career guidance

A career trajectory under the guidance of a career counsellor: questions "Who am I?", "What do I want?" And "What can I do?" are central. Career guidance provides insight into what someone wants and can do and how it can be achieved. It reveals the competences that someone has acquired in the past, in working life and beyond. A career path usually works towards a concrete step-by-step plan or action plan.

* Group career training

Group career training is for individuals who want to reflect on their career and gain insight into their qualities and ambitions. The strength of this training is working together and exchanging feedback between peers.

**Documentation**

* (E-)portfolio

A (electronic) portfolio in which the candidate reflects his qualities and experiences. The result of a (e-)portfolio is a specific collection of diplomas and proof of learning outcomes such as certificates, letters of recommendation and feedback forms. For complete validation feedback and agreement an assessor is still required (National Knowledge Centre VPL, N.D).

* Europass CV

An Europass CV is an overview of training, work experience and other competences drawn up by an individual. Europass CV is the European standard for a CV. For when someone wants to gain work experience abroad. The CV is a representation of what an individual has done in the past. It is not directly linked to a standard.

* Experience profile

The experience profile shows the qualities against the national standard without a formal assessment of these qualities. The base of the experience profile is a portfolio that a candidate drafts supported by counselling. This portfolio will be compared to the national standard and the result is an experience profile. This procedure can be a steppingstone for following the VPL procedure.

* Skills passport

The Skills Passport is an online tool consisting of a personal part, a skills part, a presentation page, and a career explorer. By completing questionnaires and tests, the passport generates the skills, talents, and motivations that an employee has. Based on this, the passport gives suggestions for professions that match the generated skills of the employee (Oey, 2020).

**Assessment**

* Develop assessment

Development assessments are usually used to obtain a substantiated basis for learning results. This can be used for career guidance or growth trajectories within an organization. The assessment can be compared to specific function demands when it is used to qualify for a specific job. The assessment may consist of tests, roleplays, and evaluation of practical situations. The result of the assessment is a personal development advice.

* VPL procedure

A VPL procedure is a validation tool used in the labour market track and the educational track as well. But in the educational track we talk about ‘exemptions’ related to CREBO (for VET) and CROHO (for HE) standards, or partial qualifications (ECVET).

With a VPL procedure an individual can validate the knowledge, skills, and competences, which he or she has gathered over time. These competences can be acquired in various ways through formal, non-formal and informal learning. A VPL procedure gives a picture of an individual’s knowledge, skills, and competences against a chosen (qualification) profile. These include all regulated qualifications in VET and HE. Sector qualifications developed by branches can also function as VPL standards. Specific characteristics of VPL procedures in the Netherlands are:

* Evaluation and recognition of skills always takes place along the line of a national standard (CREBO, CROHO or sectoral standard).
* VPL is an open market: public as well as private education and training providers can be recognised as VPL providers.
* VPL is orientated to the labour market (career development) as well as to education and training (to shorten the education programme).
* Everyone can follow an VPL procedure. There is no specific target group.
* A VPL procedure always ends with a certificate of experience.
* The use of VPL is financially supported by tax measures for the employers as well as for individuals.



Figure 6: Retrieved from National Knowledge Centre VPL, 2019

* Criterion-based interview

The validation of previously mentioned instruments usually takes place through a criterion-based interview. In this interview the candidate will have the opportunity, through a structured oral conversation, to convince the assessor that the candidate possesses the required competencies. The assessor will ask to describe a specific situation clearly to determine whether the candidate is competent enough. Besides the interview, it is also possible to validate the qualities mentioned in the portfolios by work observations and work assignments.

**Certification**

* Assessment report VPL

The assessment report VPL shows the competences against the national standard without a formal assessment of these qualities. Through the education track it is possible to obtain exemption for certain parts in education programmes. This leads to a tailormade

programme which eventually leads up to a formal diploma. The educational institution

where the assessment report VPL is offered contributes to the validation by converting

(parts of) the program into a diploma or exemption.

## Validation tools in the education track

The following validation tools are used in the education track. In the educational track there is a dichotomy. Students and future students can choose between the procedure before entering, this means that the student arranges his own preparatory phase before enrolment. Students can choose to apply for personal customization during the course. In both cases the assessors perform the evaluation and give advice to the examination committee. The tools described below are distinctive for the education track but the most tools of validation used in the labour market track are also used in (combination with) the education track.

**Identification**

The identification stage is similar to the validation tools in the labour market track.

* Orientation

A part of the identification stage is orientation. In this phase a student can have conversations with a study counsellor. It is similar to career guidance but then with study career.

**Documentation**

* (E-)portfolios

This is similar to the (e-)portfolios mentioned in the labour market track.

**Assessment**

* Intake-assessments

The intake-assessments are an instrument where a candidate visualizes previous learning or work experience in relation to an education standard with the aim of determining whether the candidate can participate in a specific education program. The assessment may consist of portfolio review, performance assessment and progress tests. The result of the assessment is an admission or rejection to the educational program but can also give a dispensation for certain examinations or parts of the course (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2017). An example of these assessments is the 21+ test, this assessment takes place when a candidate has no formal high school or VET 4 diploma and wants to start a HE studies. The test has two components, an intellectual capacity test and a Dutch language test.

* Suitability test

To make it attractive for employees from other sectors to start retraining for a job in a shortage sector side entry processes have been started. Before the side entry process can start there is an assessment to see if the employee would fit the job and has the right motivation for the retraining. The assessment can consist of a performance assessment on the job and a criterion guided interview.

**Certification**

* Exemption procedure

An exemption procedure maps out which certificates and diplomas a person has obtained and which previous learning experiences he has gained in relation to a training standard. The aim is to determine whether exemptions can be granted. An exemption procedure is carried out by an education institution. On the basis of diplomas, certificates and previous learning experiences, the institution assesses whether an exemption can be granted for parts of the study program.

## Information, guiding and counselling

For the implementation and use of validation arrangements by individuals, these individuals have the right on guidance during the validation process. Apart from the National Knowledge Centre VPL all the accredited VPL providers in the education and labour marker track have the obligation to offer information and advice on how validation procedures work and where results possibly can be used for. However, this is done in different ways (OECD, 2017). The information and guidance are distributed on different levels. On the macro level, the information comes from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, social partners, and the National Knowledge Centre VPL. On the meso level, the information is distributed by sector partners such as employers and trade unions and on the micro level the human resource departments, when present, are responsible. As well as all the private VPL providers and the schools and universities who provide validation, they are the main source of information for an interested individual candidate. A regional structure called learning work counters (*LeerwerkLoketten*) had been set up across the country. These counters can be visited by everyone to receive free information on learning and working opportunities. They can play the role of linking pin between providers and the labour market (Cedefop, 2019).

The learning work counters are a positive initiative to support individuals in the VNFIL trajectory. The procedure has been made transparent by dividing phases, so individuals are familiar with the steps needed to be taken. It consists of five phases:

1. Raising awareness and commitment among individuals and organizations on the use and goals of validation.
2. Recognising the skills need of the organization and building a portfolio of evidence of skills acquired in the past.
3. Assessing skills against a qualification or standard and having that validated by an assessor.
4. Developing a plan that matches the individuals and organizations goals and starting the learning pathway.
5. Implementing the strategy for updating the individuals' portfolio and the organizations' human resource management plan (OECD, 2017).

Yet, the procedure is not very common in the labour market. Every step in the validation procedure knows certain limitations for the individual.

# General features VNFIL (VPL) in labour market track

In this chapter the responsibilities of stakeholders, quality assurance and funding of the labour market track are described. The objective of the labour market track is the validation of learning outcomes for career goals related to the labour market and non-formal education.

The labour market track is mostly used by employees, foremost in the technical and health care sector. The personnel shortage in these sectors is the reason for employers to invest in lifelong development to retain enough employees. The sectors where no formal education is established, for example for school leaders, validation of non-formal and informal learning is popular. A third group who takes part in the labour market track are the self-employed (ZZP) in sectors where a diploma is required to perform certain proceedings for example in health and youth care.

## Responsibilities of stakeholders

The following stakeholders are responsible of the VPL procedures and advancement of VPL in the labour market track. Another important responsibility of following stakeholders is to ensure that VPL procedures are anchored in policy and collective labour agreements.

**Policy level**

**Social partners**

The social partners, such as the Foundation of Labour, has the responsibility to distribute the VPL services in the labour market track. Whereby the training of employees is the primary task, as well as stimulating the use of validation through collective labour agreements. In specific sectors, social partners have established funds (O&O) to fund the valuation of personal competences of employees. In most cases social partners, sector organizations and accredited VPL providers are involved in setting up VPL procedures (Duvekot, 2019). The Employee Insurance Agency (UWV) has a connecting task between social partners, VPL suppliers and job seekers.

**VPL advisory board**

In 2016 social partners, Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science drew up a covenant about VPL. This covenant is signed by these ministries, social partners, and members of the advisory board. The VPL advisory group is established through this covenant. The VPL advisory board stimulates the following activities:

* promotes the interests of VPL as an important validation tool;
* stimulates the use and implementation of VPL in career policy;
* consults with and advises the labour foundation on quality assurance;
* stimulates an optimal connection between VPL in the labour market and educational track.

**Performing level**

**National Knowledge Centre VPL**

The Foundation Examination room *(Stichting Examenkamer)* performs the quality assurance for VPL in the labour market track. It is a private activity on request of the social partners. As of 2016 the Foundation examination room has been appointed by the Foundation of Labour (*Stichting van de Arbeid*) as the executive organization of the National Knowledge Centre VPL. The Foundation Examination room is in the labour market track responsible for:

* designate evaluating organizations;
* designate VPL providers;
* approval of national professional- and sector standards for use as VPL-standards;
* quality assurance of the assessment report VPL;
* manage the VPL quality code.

**VPL providers**

The VPL providers are private suppliers of the assessment report VPL in the labour market track. In total there are 25 VPL providers. The VPL providers aim to complete VPL procedures together with an individual. They also arrange independent assessors to review the documents supplied by the candidate. VPL providers need to meet the quality requirements set by the National Knowledge Centre VPL. In 2017 these 25 VPL providers have performed 3000 VPL procedures (Kunst & van Rooden, 2019).

**Quality authorities**

Quality authorities Hobeon and Testudo work on behalf of the National Knowledge Centre VPL. These organizations have been assessing a large number of VPL providers for many years in order to determine whether they have sufficient quality to become nationally recognized as a VPL provider. The quality of a VPL procedure is mainly determined by the quality of the assessors concerned.

## Quality assurance

### National Quality Code

The National Quality Code for VPL (based on the ‘European Common Principles for

Recognition and Validation of Non-formal and Informal Competencies’) was initiated in 2006

as an instrument for stimulating the use of VPL in VET and HE (PLW, 2009), by creating control and trust in the quality of VPL providers. In 2012, the code was upgraded to a tripartite governed quality instrument, in order to enhance the chain responsibility. Government, employers, and trade unions declared by signing the VPLcovenant that VPL was now – on top of the qualification-instrument – grounded as a labour market tool for career guidance (Vsl VPL, 2012). With the creation of the two tracks since 2016, the quality assurance of VPL has been divided. For both systems, the existing quality code remains the base of quality assurance. The difference is that quality of validation for qualifications in the education track remains a responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. This quality control is integrated into existing procedures for quality assurance in the education system. Apart from monitoring and evaluation carried out under the National Quality Code and through the quality system in the education track there is no official framework for qualitative and quantitative evaluation of progress and practice of VNFIL in the Netherlands (Duvekot, 2019).

For the VPL-procedure a VPL Quality Code has been developed. The five components of the VPL Quality Code over time remained as followed:

1. **Objective VPL procedures** Purpose of VPL is to reveal, appreciate and recognise specific competences. VPL is a value in itself and contributes to employability. VPL leads in many cases to further personal career development.
2. **Rights VPL** meets the needs of the individual. Rights and commitments are clearly articulated and assured.
3. **Research Procedures** and instruments are reliable and based on recognised standards. ‘Trust’ is a keyword. Trust has to do with well-defined standards, civil effects, and clear information about how assessments are conducted and what arguments conclusions are based on.
4. **Assessors and supervisors** Assessors and supervisors are competent, independent, and impartial. Independence and impartiality are key factors in the assessment and are embedded in the roles and responsibilities of the assessors. It is important to avoid confusion of roles. Impartiality can be strengthened through training and participation in learning networks.
5. **Quality** The quality of the VPL process is secured and constantly improved. The qualities of the VPL procedure and the validation instruments used during the procedure are assured through the quality arrangements. There are regular evaluations, following which results are incorporated into actions to secure improvements. Indirectly, the quality is guaranteed in the context of redemption routes by examination boards and directly where the assessment report VPL is if is converted into a certificate of professional competence. There is currently a new round of the quality code, named VPL quality code 2.0. Assessment Organizations work is based on the VPL quality code 2.0. At least every year and a half an audit takes place. In between an audit will take place for new domains who want to start with VPL-procedures. Based on an audit carried out by an assessment organization, a piece of advice is issued on the basis of which the Knowledge Centre VPL can accredit a VPL provider. Last year the National Knowledge Centre VPL deployed the anonymized peer review tool to achieve further quality assurance.

## Funding

VPL is a private activity in the labour market track. Therefore, VPL is financed by individual employers and/or Sectoral Training and Development Funds (*O&O fondsen*). Larger companies (with over 500 employees) self-finance the application for VPL through incorporation in their human resource management. Small to medium enterprises (SME) are supported by sectoral training funds. Numerous Collective Labour Agreements in sectors mention compensation for employers and employees when using VPL. A critical note is made in the OECD (2017) report: funding of the VPL procedure relies heavily on the support of the Sectoral Training and Development funds. These funds are in most cases unobtainable for flex workers and with a growing number of flex workers in the Dutch labour market this could be a potential risk for the development of these workers. If an individual wants to start a VPL procedure, the applicant always pays directly to a VPL provider. When the applicant continues the process in the education track, the process is paid by the educational institution directly towards the VPL provider. VPL is subject to the tax scheme, whereby costs can be deducted from the tax return for someone who paid for the route themselves. On the first of January 2022, the government will probably start with a new regulation called the STAP budget. With this regulation employed and un-employed receive a personal development budget of a maximum of 1000 euros per year. The aim of this budget is to increase the opportunities on the labour market. Due to recent developments regarding the COVID-19 pandemic retraining is becoming much more important. The government supports this in the second emergency measurement (NOW) by providing more subsidies for retraining upon dismissal due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

# General features VNFIL (validation) in education track

In this chapter the responsibilities of stakeholders, quality assurance and funding in the education track are described (see also Table 2).

The education track is mostly used by individuals with work experience. They follow the track to further develop their competences and want to have it awarded with a formal diploma. In specific sectors, there are agreements about the bridge from VET education to higher education. Students receive a standard dispensation (the educational track is sometimes used by workers over the age of 23 who want to switch within or outside their branch). A new development can be observed in the use of the education track by youngsters who follow part-time education. An explanation for this can be found in the changes in funding for students.

## Responsibilities of stakeholders

**Ministry of Education, Culture and Science**

The responsibilities of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science are since the dual approach in 2016 merely geared towards the educational track. Through this track, the government focusses on stimulating lifelong development (LLD) by the promotion and facilitation of tailored education programmes for obtaining national qualifications. The government is fully responsible for the quality assurance of validation through regular supervision of quality by the inspectorate (VET) and the accreditation body NVAO (HE). The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in collaboration with the ministry of Social Affairs and Employment and Economic Affairs and Climate is responsible for the policy regarding LLD.

**The Dutch Inspectorate of Education (VET) / NVAO (HE)**

The Dutch Inspectorate of Education carries out evaluations and reviews of VET schools and private educational institutions offering by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science recognized qualifications. When validation is embedded in the exam processes, guarding the quality is part of their responsibility. In higher education, the NVAO is responsible for the accreditation of educational institutions, and in collaboration with external VPL providers and in decision-making based on assessment report VPL in a general sense. Within their accreditation process the examination committee is reviewed. If validation is embedded, the examination committee is responsible for the choices made and the dispensation when granted. The authority and responsibility for decision-making about admission to (abbreviated) courses, exemptions and diplomas lie with examination boards. The supervision of this decision-making by examination boards is part of the regular supervision (inspection)/regular external quality assurance (NVAO) in Education.

**Formal education (vocational and higher education)**

The formal educational institutions are responsible for the conversion of the assessment report VPL and exemption procedures to facilitate personal learning routes when validation has been proved. A knowledge point has been established to support the use of VPL in vocational education. The Knowledge point vocational education lifelong development (*Kennispunt MBO LLO*) makes an effort to inform VET schools and individuals about the ability of shorter educational tracks. The knowledge point also stimulates VET schools to share their knowledge about shortening the tracks. With these short tracks, employees with work experience have access to a personal learning trajectory based on earlier obtained skills. The education and VET act (*WEB*) offer the scope for different forms of customization.

**Examination boards**

In general, examinations boards are responsible for the decision-making about admission and reduction/exemption based on various forms and instruments for validation. The examination boards are responsible for issuing exemptions for parts of the study program and examinations in connection with, for example, an assessment report VPL. This is especially applicable in the education track. Decision-making based on external VPL procedures and assessment reports VPL is still somewhat behind, due to insufficient cooperation agreements between VPL providers and examining boards, but validation in education happens more often than VPL procedures via VPL providers.

## Quality assurance

**Higher education**

The NVAO monitors Dutch and Flemish higher education and independently ensures the quality of higher education by assessing programmes and providing a quality mark: accreditation. Only NVAO-accredited programs are recognised by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and receive funding. But there are also NVAO-accredited programs that are offered by private education institutions that do not receive government funding. The Dutch and Flemish ministers monitor the functioning of the NVAO, and the Dutch Inspectorate of Education monitors the Dutch accreditation system as a whole.

Thus, in Higher Education:

* the NVAO ensures the quality and levels of HE by assessing the education and providing a quality mark (accreditation);
* the Inspectorate of Education is the competent quality supervision authority for Education in the Netherlands, except for accreditation in Higher Education. In Higher Educationthe tasks of the Inspectorate of Education are limited to enhance the development, and more specifically the quality of the structure and organization of higher education, including the system of accreditation.

**VET education**

The Inspectorate of Education is responsible for ensuring that VET schools comply with the statutory requirements set out in the respective sectoral education acts. The 2017 Inspection assessment Frameworks for each sector describe their way of working and what factors they assess.

In *vocational education and training* the Inspectorate of Education not only reviews the quality of the providers and their management on an annual base but also looks after the quality of the providers responsible for examinations in the VET sector. Students also play a role in assessing the quality of the providers. These results are public.

The monitoring is risk-based, the Inspectorate of Education performs every year a risk analysis to determine if there is any reason to believe that a school lacks quality. Inspectors visit the examination boards of the schools. If the analysis indicates *no risk,* then the school is submitted to a so-called ‘basic supervision’. If the analysis indicates a *possible risk*, the school will be required to provide additional information. The Inspectorate of Education will examine the nature and background of the perceived risk and a more detailed analysis is carried out of both the additional information provided and the original information gathered. If this leads to a positive result, that means the school shows a sufficient level of quality, the Inspectorate of Education will return to basic supervision. This approach leads to tailored quality assurance.

As far as the quality assurance of examination is concerned, the inspectors ensure that the national examination runs as it is supposed to be. In some cases, the Inspectorate of Education may take measures, such as declaring the examination of a candidate or a school invalid. Post-examination monitoring by the Inspectorate of Education also takes place, using the examination data, or by checking whether schools have determined the right result for each pupil. The school board is responsible for the quality of education at the school, the financial situation and the compliance with the laws and regulations. The board is accountable for the school’s results. The findings of each inspectorate are public.

### Quality assurance of exemptions

In the education track the quality of validation is guaranteed by the examination boards. The Inspection of Education (VET) and the accreditation authority NVAO (HE) supervises examination, certification, and the value of diplomas. They supervise the quality based on a nationally established qualification structure. The Inspection of Education (VET) and the NVAO (HE) review if the standards are met in educational practice. During an inspection, the Inspection (VET) and external quality assessment organizations (HE) talk with assessors and assess examination instruments (see the assessment framework). If an examination board granted exemptions of education or examination, this will be included in the inspection.

The Inspection of Education has researched in 2012 about the quality decision-making by examination boards based of the assessment report VPL. The problem that the Inspectorate found was that the examination boards made their decisions regarding admission to (abbreviated) courses, exemptions and certification based on VPL procedures that are insufficiently substantiated and insufficiently provided with underlying documentation. One of the reasons for this was the quality of the substantiation of the assessment reports VPL.

It is safe to say that examination boards struggle with maintaining the quality and granting exemptions for education and exams within the national standards that are momentarily set.

### Quality assurance of validation practitioners

In the education track, there are no formal national standards for the various validation functions available, nor a standard or qualification for assessors in the Netherlands. Every educational institute can organise the validation process within its own quality standards for examination (Duvekot, 2019). When validated based of previously attended higher education, education institutions work with specific assessors. In portfolio assessments universities work with assessors with the ‘four-eyes principle’. Two assessors are used to ensure the reliability of the assessments. This also applies to the portfolio assessment. The criterion-based interview is additionally used with a view to the validity and reliability of the assessment. Also, in this the ‘four-eyes principle’ applies.

## Funding

In the education track, validation has been embedded in the programming of VET-schools and higher education. Payment for validation in the education track only takes place at private institutions and at validation "in front of the gate" at public institutions. Validation in front of the gate is validation before the education programs begin. The individual must pay in advance for the entry of the learning programme as intake-assessment or as an integrated payment for the learning trajectory. Another possibility is that payments are done by an employer or a subsidy. For example, when validation is used for lateral entry in teacher training. In case of a stand-alone option, the costs can be paid back after accessing a funded learning trajectory. The costs for validation vary between EUR 1.200 and EUR 2.500. Validation during the programme is funded through educational institutions, in higher education and VET. Educational institutions pay for it from government funding.

# Results of VNFIL

Overall, the current results of VNFIL in the labour market and education track are still limited and the market of VPL providers and applicants is small. The use of VPL procedures is not anchored in the industry- and professional qualifications. Therefore, we observe still more focus on validation through the education track. It remains difficult to indicate exact numbers of validation in the Netherlands because of the lack of registration and a large number of initiatives. However, the impact of validation on the individual level is very big, because the candidate is seen, heard, and recognized which is valuable.

## The results of VPL in labour market track

Currently, social partners have not succeeded in getting VPL procedures anchored in HR policies and implementation practices of companies and institutions in the area of human resources and career development. Validation instruments are not integrated into processes that are already taking place, so it looks like validation takes a lot of extra time and money. Therefore, validation is unilaterally focused on obtaining formal diplomas. Validation in the labour market has not yet become an independent, adult professional practice. There are so many forms and names of certificates linked to VNFIL, which makes it complex, inefficient, and hard to understand for employers and employees what the civil value is of one of those documents. This lack of transparency also makes collaboration with education institutions difficult. Supporting HR policy by integrating validation procedures in the HR process can help improve implementation of validation, but trust in the validation process plays a major role. So far, little has been implemented in the labour market track, and this is partly because VPL procedures are rigged with an extra quality system that is not necessary and that complicates the integral process of validation and learning.

In the Customer Journey research conducted by Kunst & Rooden (2019) the following challenges of validation procedures are experienced by individuals:

**Filling a portfolio is too difficult**. It is complex, too academic, and theoretical. It is asking for computer skills. Guidance is needed for the language used and the theoretical character of the portfolio. This will not motivate individuals to start and finalize validation procedures.

**Lead time too long.** The process of validation procedures (e.g. VPL procedure) takes a year to complete before they have the desired diploma.

**Employees feel inferior if they do not complete their VPL-procedure.** Employees who, despite their many years of work experience, feel unable to complete the VPL process are mortified in their pride. They have not been able to prove that they have the right skills and that is bad for their self-esteem.

Evaluation on the validation system experienced through organizations:

**The assessment report VPL has insufficient value**. It is no diploma. An employer does not offer a job simply based on this report and external parties do not recognize the assessment report VPL as qualification of the employees.

**The educational standards do not fit well.** The competences the employees need to possess are not tempting enough about their mastery and their pride and passion for the profession. The focus is more on formalization rather than talent and experience. They are too abstract, do not fit the context of the job or are not up to date. These do not always fit with the skills required for work.

**VPL procedures demands a lot from the employer.** Especially for the smaller ones this can be problematic for employers. There are then few employees and there is not enough time and money for someone responsible for HR and guidance and motivate about the VPL process.

**Competencies are based on (basic) educational skills.** The competences do not reflect the years of experience of employees. The competences are in line with obtaining a VET or HE diploma and therefore fits well with the basic competences of a starting employee and less with more experienced workers.

In the labour market track validation procedures are mostly used in large sectors such as healthcare, education, and technology. These sectors use VPL procedures because it is organized in this way, there are resources available and possibilities to refer to clear job profiles. However, employers still focus on hard evidence, such as a formal recognized diploma, or a NLQF-level qualification. Proof of recognized acquired competences is not yet a replacement for that diploma. This may change in the future, but it is difficult to predict.

## Practical examples of VPL in labour market

### Practical example: The development of sector professional- and industry standards

As mentioned before, only recognized standards as: CREBO, CROHO, industry and professional standards and cross-professional competence standards are used for validation in the labour market track. All these approved sectoral standards are included in the VPL register of the National Knowledge Centre VPL.

An earlier research by Kunst & Van Rooden (2019) shows that sectoral industry standards should be developed in a way that suits employees, the profession, and the work context. Therefore, encouraging the development of a professional adult qualification system is important. In consultation with employers, insurers, clients, and inspections in a sector, determine how a person's mastery of the professional/profession-oriented qualifications can be assessed and guaranteed in an VPL procedure. This makes it an independent value document, which is recognized in access to work. In addition, creating support among different stakeholders as employers, insurers, clients, inspections, and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is important for the development of standards (Kunst & Rooden, 2019).

It is visible that the demand for professional and industry standards is increasing and more industries are creating their own industry standards. In 2017, for example, youth care, care for the disabled, school leaders, woodworking, neighbourhood sports coaches and swimming pool functions created their own professional industry standards. Several arguments are found for the demand in creating own professional and industry standards:

* New disciplines from the sector that have not been included in educational standards;
* The educational standards are still based on the old system and the field of activity has changed much faster;
* Branches want to qualify people based on smaller units/’(Partial) certificates’ (Kunst & Rooden, 2019).

There would be no pitfalls in making use of these professional industry standards if everyone adhered the same standards. However, also private VPL providers differ enormously in their approach of validation. Some providers say that the entire process of validation can take place through one good conversation. But another company believes that the process of validation takes at least three months to guarantee quality. So, there is a lot of space for interpretation of quality in standards. In this way there is an opportunity to offer less quality in a shorter time for validation of learning. There is a national agreement, the VPL quality code, but the instruments used for this may be too flexible and therefore cannot be tightly controlled. There is a wish from the ‘industry’ VPL providers to work together better and to make better agreements with each other to guarantee quality assurance in validation. To realise this, currently there are conversations between different parties involved.

### Practical example: Professional standard skilled Youth and family professional

The professional standard for skilled youth and family professional has been specially developed for professionals working in youth care and youth protection, who have been working at NLQF-level 6 or higher for at least one year. It concerns a standard of the youth and welfare sector and the integration in HR policy affiliated with the sector. This VPL trajectory assess to what extent someone has the competencies required to do work, which requires the deployment of a registered youth and family professional. Therefore, this professional standard has been developed based on the competence profile for youth and family professionals (VGN, 2018). Professionals working in the youth care sector, who do not meet registration requirements, can apply for this VPL procedure. A further condition is that these professionals perform work in accordance with the responsible work allocation standard and that they do not meet the requirements for registration in the quality register for youth and family professionals (SKJ).

During this VPL procedure the youth professional collects several evidences (professional products) from their work in an e-portfolio. This evidence gives an impression of the professional actions in the relevant area of ​​expertise of the VPL standard ‘skilled professional youth and family professional’. After submitting their e-portfolio, assessors will discuss in a conversation whether the professional can demonstrate 80 percent of the indicators in each of the six areas of expertise. During the criterion-based interview, the professional is tested whether he/she can substantiate their professional actions within the six areas of expertise with theoretical insights. After the VPL process, the professional will receive an assessment report VPL. If the professional has met the competency requirements, the assessment report VPL can be redeemed into an official document: the certificate of professional competence ‘skilled higher professional education youth and family professional’. With this proof the professional can register or re-register in the quality register Youth and family professionals (SKJ).

The assessment report VPL have been anonymized, which increases the quality and contributes to the harmonization and validation of the working youth care professional. This peer review method contributes to the application of VPL procedures in the youth care sector. It makes an important contribution to the improvement of the process and quality assurance. This method makes it possible to establish the professionalism of professionals.

## The results of validation in education track

Adult workers are more likely to start training if they can follow an individual learning pathway and receive formal appreciation for relevant work experience considering the training they are going to follow. Flexibilization of individual learning paths is the solution, this works because every university of applied science designs and applies its own validation procedure. In addition, validation of work experience has not been easy for universities of applied sciences in the past. There is certainly still some restraint, but validation in formal education is established. There is a growing demand for the supply and use of validation in education. Most educational institutions discontinued with VPL procedures and continued with their regular exemption policy, in which the scope for validating work experience differs between study programs and institutions. In higher education mostly validation happens within the gate. Validation ‘in front of the gate’ happens less because the validation procedure demands a lot from the student and costs between 1000-2000 euros for the student. Therefore this validation process is often not chosen. Usually, students often start the study program and use the previously acquired knowledge and skills later in the process. This can be done through methods of assessment that are independent of the curriculum and specific curriculum requirements. In terms of size, it is larger than VPL procedures on the labour market / with VPL providers. In higher professional education, for example, it concerns at least about 30,000 students who have made use of validation and shortening / tailor-made training programs. In VET there are 14,000 students who use the flexible third learning path to obtain a VET diploma.

## Practical examples of validation in higher education

### Practical example: Flexibility pilots in higher education

To flexibly the higher education system, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science supported by the NVAO and the Inspection of Education has started in 2015 the flexibility pilots. The aim of the flexibility pilots is to provide more flexible higher education and possibilities for individual learners. In addition, to make formal higher education more attractive to adults and to use previous work experience. One of the mean reasons was the enormous decline in registrations for part-time courses since the financial crisis. Universities seemed to be losing it to individual private providers. The pilots enable the transition from supply-oriented education to flexible and demand-oriented education, in which the individual learner is central. Therefore, learning outcomes are the starting point, instead of working from a fixed study program or from fixed modules. By making use of learning outcomes, it is possible to differentiate training programs and tailor-made programs to the context and situation of the individual learner and to the needs of the employer (Ministry van Education, Culture and Science, 2017). The learning outcomes approach gives room to validate what adults already know and are capable of, and to realise learning trajectories using workplace learning tailored to the needs and possibilities in the workplace (OECD, 2017). Partly through the subsidies from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science the pilots are succeeded. 21 universities of applied sciences with over 400 programmes leading to formal associate degree, bachelor and/or master’s degree gain experience in using validation instruments in pilots for flexible higher education for adult learners.

Validation takes place in various ways, in a number of cases students can demonstrate already realized learning outcomes at the start of the program, based on proof of their previous (work) experience and training, in most cases this can (also) be done in the learning path-independent assessment during the training. In order to organize more flexible programs, credits (ECTS) are disconnected. Validation is one of the important elements in the design of flexible higher education programs. As an individual learner has realized the learning outcomes, an Examination Board can award the credits belonging to that unit of the individual learner. The number of institutions and study programs that offer options for validation prior to (enrolments in) the study program is limited. In those cases, examination boards make formal decisions after enrolments and no more than indications are given in advance. Most students opt for validation during the programme, especially because the process of demonstrating learning outcomes with evidence from experience practice is a lot of work and takes a lot of time at the start. Sometimes the result of validation is disappointing, and the assessment criteria are found to be too specific and "schools". Remarkably, there are also students and employers who indicate that they do not consider shortening and acceleration based on validation to be important, because they are looking for a "complete immersion in HBO knowledge".

The flexibility pilot has now been going on for several years. The main effects of the flexibility pilots in higher education are:

* Better connection to professional practice, redesign based on the question "what should someone really know and be able to do in practice?"
* Closer cooperation with companies and institutions.
* More intensive learning in the educational meetings, in which teachers and students have become more "equal discussion partners", questions from the student's professional practice are related to theoretical insights and students contribute their own, specific expertise and experience and share it with each other.
* Less focus on the tests and exams, more in-depth focus on the content.
* Higher level of learning outcomes, due to requirements for professional products and reports, etc.
* Less "learning for school", more "learning for my own development".

It can be concluded that students (working adults) should take more direction in their own learning path process. At the moment this is not happening enough. Increasing awareness about direction is one of the challenges in the pilot for the near future. Also, providing documentary evidence in, for example, a portfolio is a huge challenge. In addition, being open to validation is not yet commonplace. Vocational training profiles are often specific and will therefore require a more generic look at learning outcomes. It can then be examined whether the same value can be attached to certain learning outcomes. Furthermore, nationally you see that many universities of applied sciences want to apply this flexibility process also in their full-time programs. However, learning outcomes need to be the same within all CROHO’s. For now, that is quite a puzzle. Especially, credits (ECTS) cannot be separated within the full-time program, which is regulated through the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

To ensure that learning units are interchangeable and comparable it is important that higher education institutions fully trust each other. Slowly, exchanging of learning units is more often taken place but mainly every university and study program is still formulating their own learning outcomes. During the flexibility pilot there are moments of national knowledge sharing where specific topics are discussed. It is a bottom-up process to look for connections in taking big steps.

### Practical example: Partnership higher education institution Windesheim and VPL provider STERK

Within the university of applied sciences Windesheim, a lot of individuals make use of the personal profiling space. Especially, by students who want to obtain a formal diploma as soon as possible. This personal profiling space is used to accelerate their validation of prior working experience and knowledge. The new structure of the part-time courses means that students feel less that they must learn things they already know. Also, the arrival of short 2-year Associate Degree courses contributed to this. Often, it is difficult for students or workers with an VPL trajectory to find a way to convert previous work experience into acceleration. The VPL procedures do not fit perfectly with the learning units formulated by the universities of applied sciences, they are far too general. Which makes it too difficult to indicate what exactly has been validated. Therefore, Windesheim have started a partnership with an VPL provider in the sector health and wellness. This ensures that the learning outcomes are validated and guaranteed. At the moment, this VPL procedure is not that popular because it costs a lot of money for the student/worker. Therefore, most students start the study and search for ways in validating during the educational program. We only speak of validation at the start of a training program if people come in with a specific question for validation, with underlying VPL or the combination of work experience and previous training.

### Practical example: the validation room (de valideringskamer)

Currently, the COVID-19 pandemic shows that many people are facing unemployment. On the other hand, there are sectors which are still in big demand for employees. Validation and retraining could help. As an educational institution also looking at (and validating) transcendental competences, this will result in a higher return on this group of lateral entry students. After all, the qualities that are already present and validated serve as access to these demand professions. In order to become skilled during the work through different learning routes (Vermeulen, 2020).

For many educational institutions and training institutes, there is a major challenge in creating a tailor-made offer for organizations, focused on specific modules and/or subjects (i.e. not following an entire course). Chain responsibility is therefore important. VPL provider Libereaux is experienced in drawing up so-called target profiles. This is a combination of requested skills, competences, and knowledge in response to challenges that an employer or team faces. Together with the organization, the employees build up the target profiles (ownership) and then see which skills they already possess (targeted development). In consultation with the educational institution, Libereaux will inventory and facilitate the targeted supply and development needs (Vermeulen, 2020).

The target profile/professional profile is linked to Libereaux's e-portfolio: DITKANIK.NU. This allows an individual (online and remotely) to makes clear what he has in-house and what this experience is worth. The (working) student creates so-called ‘milestones. This can be an education, a function, or a project to which he has contributed. The milestones provide a complete overview of his or her knowledge and (work) experience. In addition, the individual collects evidence of his knowledge and experience. He links these pieces of evidence to the yardstick in the e-portfolio, the relevant target profile/professional profile. In this way, the individual shows what experience he already has with the competences and underlying indicators. During this process, a supervisor will investigate the e-portfolio and advise the employee on which supporting documents he/she can include. Finally, based on the e-portfolio and the final interview, the supervisor writes a short development advice: which courses and/or modules to follow and for which exemption can be obtained (Vermeulen, 2020).

## Validation procedures in vocational education (VET)

Knowledge Point VET in lifelong development *(kennispunt MBO LLO)* is involved in the validation procedures of formal vocational education. There is a growing demand for flexible education within government-funded education. There are many questions from organizations who want to offer their employees training in a flexible way. So, the demand for validation of previously acquired knowledge and competences is high. It is more attractive for educational institutions to offer a flexible route for a group than for an individual. The Knowledge Point VET experiences that schools want to enter partnerships to offer customization for such groups. Schools are more active in this than offering flexible programs to individuals because delivering individual learning paths in vocational education is often still too difficult in practice and too expensive.

Some vocational educational institutions have an extensive intake that includes validation. There are also standard flexible routes for students with previous experience. The Knowledge Point VET has written a guide for this purpose to support examination boards. The guide is called: ‘granting an exemption by examination boards’. This was in high demand because VET schools did not always dare to offer flexible courses. They were afraid of facing consequences by the Inspectorate of Education. This guide shows that much more is possible in validation than schools initially think. The guide was drawn up in collaboration with various parties such as the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the inspectorate of Education.

### The third learning path

As in higher education, VET education has developed a similar variant compared to the flexibility pilots namely, the third learning path *(De derde leerweg).* The third learning path has everything within its power to maximize validation. Because the third learning path focusses on the output of the learning process to validate learning outcomes of individuals. CREBO standards have already been described in learning outcomes. However, the disadvantage is that the third learning path is not funded, so it is less accessible for individuals because it is too expensive. In addition, there is a striking number of 66 percent of students who leave the programme without obtaining a diploma. Because in many cases it is not always clear what space there is in legislation to set up flexible programs. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has published a brochure in collaboration with the VET council (*MBO Raad*), NRTO, National knowledge centres LLD and Examination and the Inspectorate called *‘space in the rules to develop lifelong learning’*. It contains information on how to deal with flexible routes and the third learning path. To enhance the connection to the labour market, six cooperation projects between formal and private VET institutions will receive a subsidy of 2.9 million euro to develop innovative and flexible education programs for working adults and job seekers. There are still many questions about where exemptions because of validation can be made and how this affects the duration of learning programmes. Through perseverance, it will become stronger and validation will be more obvious.

## Practical examples of validation in VET education

### Learning units in health care education via previously acquired competences

Social partners have formulated learning units together with the VPL provider ‘STERK’ and health care educators. The learning units have an independent value in the labour market and be further developed into an appropriate trajectory for adult education. The learning units are available for BBL (working and learning pathway) students in vocational education and as third learning path because the learning units together make the qualification filewhich contains the skills students’ needs to obtain a diploma. But learning units individually also lead to a certification. It should lead to vocational education that is suits better to side-entry by adult students and certificates with a national civil effect. The quality of previously acquired competences is guaranteed by a quality mark delivered by the NRTO.

Schools formulate their learning units in their own way. The learning units on VET certificates are standardized. This means that the qualification structure for VET education, containing the core tasks and work processes, are the building blocks for creating the learning units.

### Diploma pathway VET school ROC Rivor

A practical example of validation is the ‘Diplomaroute’. This route is a part of VET school ROC Rivor. This project allows employees to obtain a vocational diploma trough the practical work experience which they build up over the years. In most cases, the employees do not need additional classes before taking the exam for a level two qualification. These practical exams take place throughout the country and on different occasions during the year which makes participation more convenient. The quality is guaranteed through the control of the Inspection of Education because the ‘Diplomaroute’ is a part of government-funded education. The examinations are carried out by independent and expert assessors in order to further guarantee the quality of the diploma. Since 2010 more than 10.000 employers were given the opportunity to convert their work experience into a diploma (ROC Rivor, 2020).

### Personalised learning ROC A12

ROC A12 offers a variety of programs with the possibility of personalised learning. These programs are created with the idea that previously acquired competences receive recognition. Every student gets a personal learning trajectory which contains different professional assignments. These assignments allow the student to engage in the skills that are needed in the future profession rather than focus on skills they already have. This makes the student more aware of their own learning needs. The quality is guaranteed through the control of the Dutch Inspectorate because the educations are part of government-funded education (ROC A12, n.d.).

### Chain approach: Previously acquired competences provider Volandis with five ‘ROC’s’

Volandis is a non-profit organization established in 2016 by the collective labour agreement of the sector construction. It functions as a knowledge and advisory centre for sustainable employability. Volandis has a partnership with five vocational education centres (*ROC’s*), together they make it possible for adults to turn previously acquired competences into a diploma. This route is for employees who never obtained a vocational degree but have practical experience. By demonstrating professional competence, it is possible to receive an assessment report VPL. This certificate can be converted into a diploma via the ‘ROC’. Because of the partnership with the ROC’s quality is guaranteed through the control of the government. The quality of previously acquired competences is guaranteed by a quality mark, NRTO (Volandis, n.d.).

# Evaluation and monitoring of VNFIL in The Netherlands

## The current impact of VNFIL

There are certain key points in our current VNFIL system that demand attention. In this chapter, we will address these points which we will call challenges. These challenges are based on the interviews conducted for this one-off report and the results of research articles. To describe further challenges, it is wise to start by taking a look at the current impact of VNFIL. Individuals often experience a barrier to start a validation procedure in both tracks. The accessibility and awareness of the VNFIL system need to be increased, and the validation procedures need to be faster and easier. Also, the connection between both tracks is not optimal yet. The main problem lies in the lack of trust and good cooperation agreements between VPL providers and examination boards of educational institutions. To demonstrate success, we need good practices of validation in every sector. Individuals need small-scale examples of what they can achieve through validation in both tracks. Until now the VNFIL systemworks better for those using validation as pursuing further education than as means to understandskill development needs, facilitate career advancement and/or support organizations in their efforts to develop alearning culture in their organization. This situation stands at odds with the goals of the VNFIL system (OECD, 2017).

## Challenges in VNFIL for the future

The following challenges are important for future development of VNFIL in the Netherlands:

### The value of VNFIL

The challenge for the future is to continue to focus on the development of VNFIL. Further stimulation of the importance of validation. Because validation is the tool to increase the accessibility to education and foremost for adults in the context of LLD. It is and remains a very desirable approach to provide insight into the skills and competences of individuals. The COVID-19 pandemic shows us that in times of crisis it is even more important to validate competences. In these times there is a need to be able to switch to sectors with shortages. The pandemic is in that light a potential help to increase the awareness of validation. Ultimately, informal learning takes place for 70% in the workplace. Therefore, it is important to keep on encouraging validation. Validation creates visibility in skills and competences, but there is a challenge to create more clarity for the individual and employer about all the different validation instruments. The question is how do we get all these different validation instruments accepted in society? VNFIL is at the moment only worth something in society if it has a name, a recognition from, for example, a university. Many employers still value formal qualifications above non-formal qualifications such as Certificates of Experiences provided by VPL providers. The challenge is to have validation procedures recognized as equalization or addition to formal diplomas/qualifications. The challenges would be easier if there would be unambiguity in names of all the certificates.

### Challenges in the education track

The flexibility pilot has shown in higher education, using learning outcomes in the learning process of individuals can contribute to validation and flexibilization. For the future, it is a challenge to facilitate validation through more flexible customization based on learning outcomes in education. In addition, independent learning path assessments can contribute to this. Developments like the flexibility pilots, and the third learning pathway show this important challenge. In VET education the third learning path has already been anchored in legislation *(WEB)*. The challenge for higher education is to get the flexibility pilot (the learning outcomes approach) structurally embedded in legislation. The law has already been announced by the Minister of Education, Sciences and Culture and is already being prepared. Implementation of the statutory frameworks for flexibilization will take place in 2022.

The demand for flexibilization in education and validation is very high, as there is an increasing need to recognize and value smaller learning units. The rapid developments in the world are contributing to the demand for micro-credentials and Edu badges. Discussions among stakeholders are on-going in what way these micro-credentials or Edu badges should be organized. Organizing more flexible learning paths and assessments for individuals are needed in the future but also constitute a challenge, because many schools organize themselves within the possibilities of the current structure and frameworks. Also, it takes time to deliver more flexible education programmes because an educational organization is often bound and anchored, which makes it difficult to implement new ideas. The challenge for educational institutions is to learn more from each other and share examples in flexibilization and validation.

A third part of the challenges in the education track is the acceptance from certificates obtained elsewhere. With flexibility by using learning outcomes this challenge will be smaller because of the interchangeable nature of learning outcomes. But for now, a large number of certificates are not validated because of the lack of trust. Even when, for example, there is an NLQF level linked to it. This could result in additional time and costs for (adult) learner and for employers as well.

### Challenges in the labour market track

Like the educational track, there is a big need for more customization in learning trajectories. This is especially important for adult learners. Despite the various ways to validate prior learning there is still little connection with the needs from the labour market. This is mainly visible in the lack of acceptance of the validation instruments and outcomes in society.

Furthermore, the streamlining of all validation instruments is necessary. The current offer is causing confusion. And there is still too much focus on the validation instruments. Through learning outcomes, the focus is more on the learning outcome instead of the validation instrument. If the learning outcomes approach is more embedded and integrated than the challenge is to get this approach leading towards valuable certificates that are recognized by employers and education. By making results of validation visible in an unambiguous manner. Therefore, it is needed that one type of certificate will be developed, having civil value, and being recognized by different users. A unit of certificates with civil effect can contribute to trust in the validation system.

The challenge for organizations is for example to create personal employees’ portfolios so that employees can use this to qualify for validation. This could be done in collaboration with education institutions and VPL providers, for example by embedding validation in HR policy. The challenge for the government is to boost the VNFIL system by creating more awareness. At this moment, the government stimulates lifelong development by subsidies but as mentioned previously these subsidies are not obtainable for all employees who need it due to lack of communication or the tight scope of subsidies. In the end, the focus should be less on VPL providers and more on the users of the validation system. Another challenge is that covenant partners support and promotes the validation system so that it can become a recognizable and strong system. This is possible with the deployment of the VPL providers in the labour market track, but this takes much longer without external support. Therefore, the challenge is to get the bridging function accepted, supported but also to give the labour market track its own identity by the recognition of the labour market track in vacancies, job interviews, and collective labour agreements.

### Stakeholders should take more responsibility and trust in VNFIL

Currently, there will be more impact in the VNFIL system if all stakeholders find validation

important and have trust in each other. Clear and transparent communication about validation needs to be strengthened among all stakeholders, but this is still a quest. How do we ensure that employers consider validation as more important? And how do you ensure that the labour market approaches validation at local and regional level? How can the government create more awareness among professionals about validation? More conversations about the starting point of validation are needed, what do you want to achieve with the VNFIL system? The challenge is to highlight the broad context of lifelong development again.

Furthermore, it is a challenge is to make the process clear to every layer of society. Because of different rules, many different names and abbreviations individuals cannot see the forest for its trees. The demand for validation can be influenced because of these hurdles. If there is lesser demand HR will likely not investigate the many options and policymakers will not encourage validation. This will be at the expense of labour mobility and the development of lifelong learning. The importance of chain cooperation and making good cooperation agreements is clear. Both challenges have an underlying issue of trust, cooperation, and communication between the different stakeholders. Information about the importance of informal learning and the acceptance of validation outcomes is needed.

### Exploring the transition towards a skills system

The Lifelong Development Action Agenda, carried out by the SER (social-economic council) provides insight into what is happening, promotes the absence of mutual cooperation, and stimulates cooperation that can be expanded. Together with the field, it is explored whether a breakthrough can be achieved. For example, by making agreements about a common foundation or language for skills and competences (in line with European developments), which does not replace the existing systems, but ensures that the different types of skills passports, and other systems can be combined. The project ‘skills mapping’ has been started. In this project questions from labour market regions are investigated that deal with how to ensure that collected prior work experience and skills of individuals can be mapped. It is difficult if the information in the systems used is not interchangeable. Or if it is not clear which skills and competencies have been validated (as is the case with VPL procedures, for example), and which are not. Questions like: How do you ensure that employers can use skills and competences, in addition to diplomas in the recruitment and selection of employees? How do you link this to existing classifications and qualification structures? A breakthrough in this domain arises when (future) workers can make their developed knowledge, skills, and competences visible and take it along during their career. If employers also recognize this, skills and competences can be better involved in matching on the labour market and in choosing the right training and development. This is a challenge for the government. Their policy can help with transparency in communication about the transferability of the VNFIL system and different validation instruments.

### The current VNFIL system disadvantages low educated people

The awareness of the VNFIL system among low educated individuals is still a challenge in The Netherlands. Individuals with low levels of education are most vulnerable to cope with changes, such as technology, in the labour market. Also, lower-skilled individuals are less likely to engage in formal education, therefore it is more important to enable these individuals to take part in all changes in work and life through non-formal and informal learning (OECD, 2017). Now, the COVID-19 pandemic exposes again how important it is that individuals continue to develop professionally. Because of this, they are more resilient to shifts on the job market, as it is now and in all their intensity in the near future occur. It is about individuals who care the least do training and career development: the least educated and individuals with flexible contracts. They prove the least resilient and now the hardest affected (Hooge, 2020). A possible first step in reaching out to this vulnerable group is to make the validation procedure less bureaucratic. The question is how validation can be simplified and therefore more attractive for this target group.

Currently, it is unknown to many how to approach validation of prior learning individually as taking part in a validation procedure is extra difficult for vulnerable groups with low financial resources. Although information and guidance are provided by learning work counters and the Employee Insurance Agency (UWV) no specific initiatives for validation for migrants, refugees or other disadvantaged groups are available. The support structures of the VNFIL system are not always well aligned with the needs of the low skilled individual. The challenge for the future is to create better and accessible information together with well-organized guidance about possibilities that are key for this target group.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the challenge in the Netherlands is to work together and create a simple more robust and unambiguous VNFIL system. A summary of the challenges in a few headlines:

* Better communication and creating ownership among stakeholders
* Simplification of the validation process
* Streamlining of validation instruments
* Flexibilization of education programmes
* Unambiguity, acceptation and valorisation of certificates

The responsibility of the VNFIL system should be supported by all stakeholders. Among government, but certainly also among organizations and individuals. To evolve and ground the validation system in Dutch society trust from all stakeholders is very important. Despite the good practices described in this chapter, there is still a lot to be achieved in the context of trust and targeted communication. We are aware, because of the COVID-19 pandemic more than ever, that flexibility is important. Validation is an important tool to create flexibility. The concern is that everyone just started to understand how important flexibility and lifelong development is. Now, it is even more important to validate previously acquired knowledge and skills. We do not know how the labour market will look in the future, but we know that flexibility in validation, learning, and education will be important.

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1. AG41-5 Note on VNFIL [↑](#footnote-ref-2)