



# Women in SMEs: Validating non-formal and informal learning of family SME managers

2013-1-CH1-LEO05-00881

**WP3: Transfer of the validation framework & process with a  
focus on assessment methods**

## FINAL REPORT

*(Results 11 and 31)*

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Date: 1 September 2014

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication [communication] reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use, which may be made of the information contained therein.

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This and all other documents provided by the partners involved in the Women in SMEs project have been placed in a corresponding Dropbox folder.

## Introduction

The Women in SMEs project aims to transfer, adapt and pilot an innovative process for validating/certifying the management competences acquired by spouses in non-formal (eg in-company training) or informal (through life & work experience) settings. This validation process concerned a Federal Pet Diploma for SME Management Specialists, developed in Switzerland, by the Swiss Union of Crafts and SMEs (SGV/USAM). This report is intended to present a conclusive summary of the surveys conducted within the framework of work package 3 “Transfer of the validation framework & process with a focus on assessment methods”. WP3 is intended to set in motion a cycle of sharing information on validation practice between partners in order to define the assessment framework, the processes and methods to be considered when creating a validation path for assisting the validation for the family SMEs managers.

### Objectives of WP3:

1. To introduce the validation method and tools developed in CH for spouses: counselling, elaboration of validation portfolio, assessment, certification (from Swiss partners)
2. To explain the distinct roles of counsellors, assessors and process managers when engaged with the candidate (from Swiss partners)
3. To identify the national conditions necessary for the implementation of the validation framework & process for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning of family SME managers (from all partners)
4. To identify national best practices in assessing validation portfolios in each partner country (from all partners)
5. To produce a report on the different assessment methods used in partner countries and recommendations for assessment of spouses (from P3: SFIVET)

This document presents a summary and cross-cutting analysis of the outcome of objectives 1-4, in order to help each project partner, to transfer, adapt and improve a VNIL procedure created by Switzerland, in consideration of specific national characteristics. When preparing this report, we based ourselves on four national reports (deliverables A for objective 3; deliverables B, for objective 4) as well as on the documentation from WP2, on the presentations given during meetings 1 and 2, on a desktop research aimed at filling in lacking data. For deliverable A, we also prepared a comparative table to facilitate analysis of the data received (Annex 1). Some of the information is nevertheless incomplete because the partners are still elaborating data and working on the organisational aspects needed to carry out the project.

This document contains the following chapters:

1. Characteristics of the qualification of reference
2. Standards of the VNIL process
3. Best practices in assessing validation portfolios
4. Conclusions and recommendations

## 1. Characteristics of the qualification of reference

In this chapter, we present the specific characteristics of the qualification (or title) selected by each partner (Table 1). We consider the level that the qualification holds within the EQF, its descriptors, the project's intended beneficiaries of the project and the authority responsible for management of the validation procedure. As a reminder, the qualification of reference for the transfer of innovation is the Swiss Federal PET Diploma for SME Management Specialists.

**Table 1: Qualification (title) selected by each national partner**

SWITZERLAND	FRANCE	NETHERLANDS	SLOVENIA
FEDERAL PET DIPLOMA FOR SME MANAGEMENT SPECIALISTS	SMALL BUSINESS ASSISTANT MANAGER (ADEA –BCCEA)	RETAIL ENTREPRENEUR	BUSINESS ORGANISER OF A SMALL OR FAMILY COMPANY

All of the qualifications selected cover the areas of activity associated with managing a company. Moreover, as we can see in the comparative table of WP3 - Deliverable A (Annex 1), the partner countries faced two main difficulties when trying to match their qualifications with the Swiss one: a) intended beneficiaries of the project; b) level of the qualification.

In particular:

- a. In the Netherlands and Slovenia, there are currently no qualifications for the intended beneficiaries of the project: *Spouses or other woman partners of family SME owners, who do not hold formal recognised qualifications for the activity that they carry out as co-managers of a family business*. In addition, the surveys conducted by these countries revealed that women who co-manage a family business are often highly skilled even though they never obtained a specific qualification for the co-management activities that they carry out.
- b. For France and the Netherlands, the qualification of reference selected as the most appropriate, is situated at level 4 within the European Qualifications Framework, whereas the Swiss qualification is situated at level 5. For Slovenia, a relevant qualification initially considered to be at level 4 was found to be situated at level 5 after having carefully assessed its characteristics (SMEs accountant).

In light of these two difficulties, various adjustments had to be made:

- a. For the Netherlands, a partial modification of target group was needed, considering some of the project's ultimate objectives (to get their high level of professional qualification recognised/support development of self-efficacy, gaining confidence and greater performance at work). A decision was therefore reached to focus on women who seek a job in general and for that reason need more insight in their talents and access to a certain qualification.

- b. For Slovenia, there was a need to include competences specifically relating to co-management of an SME in the standards for acquisition of the selected qualification. Specifically, the aim will be to consider the characteristics of SMEs, adapting the qualification standards and developing the following aspects: personnel and human resources management /accounting and finance /marketing / public relations / supplier and customer management.
- c. For France and the Netherlands, there was a need to adjust assessment requirements used in the VNIL procedure, given the differences between level 4 and level 5 of the EQF. As can be seen in Table 2, the requirements for level 5 are higher not only in terms of the extension of knowledge and skills but above all in terms of awareness, managerial capacities, problem-solving, and the ability to supervise one's own activities and those of others.

**Table 2: Descriptors of EQF levels 4 and 5<sup>1</sup>**

EQF Level	Knowledge	Skills	Competence
Level 4	Factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study	Exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change; supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities
Level 5 <sup>2</sup>	Comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge	A comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems	Exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change; review and develop performance of self and others

Finally, with regards to the authority responsible for the validation procedure and general aspects, the data gathered reflect the findings from Work package 2. At the same time, the specific characteristics of the qualifications selected: a) France and Switzerland report similar organisational structures (Swiss Union of Crafts and SMEs / French National Committee of Chambers of Crafts; b) The Netherlands and Slovenia are still in the process of identifying specific authorities of reference.

<sup>1</sup> From : <http://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/content/descriptors-page>

<sup>2</sup> The descriptor for the higher education short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle), developed by the Joint Quality Initiative as part of the Bologna process, corresponds to the learning outcomes for EQF level 5.

## 2. Standards of the VNIL process

For the structuring of this chapter, we make reference to the conceptual and terminological indications established in the European Guidelines for Validating Non-formal and Informal Learning (2009)<sup>3</sup> with a few adaptations to improve the readability of the document. In particular, we have defined the following categories of standards:

- Assessment or evaluation standards, with the items: type of standards, qualifications standards, reference curricula, conditions to access validation, assessors qualification.
- Validation standards, with the items: information, advising and guidance, assessments methods, jury practice, materials or instruments.
- Certification standards, with the items: responsibility, criteria, regulation practice, remediation.

### 2.1 Assessment or evaluation standards

This category allows us to clarify the specific characteristics of the standards of reference as well as the competences of those who are involved in the assessment process.

#### 2.1.1 Type of standard

For the four partner countries, occupational standards (i.e. standards relating to a specific occupation) were the main frame of reference. For the Netherlands and Slovenia, these standards are also directly considered in the formal syllabus for the qualification considered. In the case of Switzerland and France, educational standards are used to describe the formal syllabus and correspondence tables are used to draw a distinction between occupational and educational standards.

#### 2.1.2 Qualifications standards

Qualifications standards are the descriptors of the specific areas of competence for a given professional qualification that are taken into account when assessing candidates in a VNIL procedure. As we can see in Annex 1, although all of the countries make a distinction between Knowledge, Skills and Competences (F and CH subdivide skills into methodological and personal skills), each country refers to its own categorisation and terminology (and in some cases even use several categorisations) when defining areas of competence for the qualification standard. There are also different levels of complexity in the structure of standards, which makes understanding the standards easier or more difficult.

These differences are due to varying socio-cultural factors in each context, to the different positioning of the various qualifications and to the correlation between occupational and educational standards. Each categorisation is therefore the result of a cognitive process which, depending on the case and requirements of the context, tend to favour certain aspects over others. For this reason, in the interests of encouraging comparability between the various standards, an effort was made to produce a general categorisation of all of

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/about-cedefop/projects/validation-of-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-guidelines.aspx>

the data, breaking them down into seven fields of activity (Table 3) and making reference to the category of standards for each country that seemed the easiest to compare. For Switzerland, consideration was given to operational standards, which focus on the operational aspects of the portion of the competence profile considered; for France, reference was made to areas of expertise; for the Netherlands, working processes were considered; and finally, for Slovenia, the list of competences were chosen. We would like to point out that the distinction made between the seven fields of activity is purely an operational one, within the Women in SMEs project, for the purpose of identifying the specific characteristics, differences and similarities of the qualification standards of each country.

The resulting fields of activity are as follows:

- F.1 Manage, monitoring and developing business (organisation and processes)
- F. 2 Controlling financial processes
- F. 3 Supervise and manage sales activities (about products and customers)
- F. 4 Manage human resources
- F. 5 Manage communication processes and tools
- F. 6 Take into account the commercial, social and ecological environment
- F. 7 Take into account the specific role as a partner of a business owner

The comparative table below presents the distribution of the fields of activity for each NQS

**Table 3: Fields of activities of the 4 national qualification standards**

SWITZERLAND Operational competencies	FRANCE Areas of expertise	NETHERLANDS Work processes	SLOVENIA Competencies
<b>F.1 Manage, monitoring and developing the business (organisation and processes)</b>			
1. Manage the business independently. 2. Consider the company globally 3. Identify the opportunities and risks of the business environment 5. Follow the evolution of the business environment. 9. Determine a structure and internal organizational processes and implement them in the company.	1. Manage internal & external relations 4. Master techniques, methods & IT tools in order to cover all office & secretarial duties 5. Create administrative organisation & management procedures; Put the appropriate tools in place 7. Understanding the legal & tax systems	1.1 Determines the (future) image of the company 1.2 Shapes the company 1.7 Positions and / or innovates the company	2. Ensuring quality and efficiency of the working environment in accordance with the rules of good business practices and standards 3. Monitoring a development of the profession as such 4. Rationally using of energy, materials and time 6. Developing entrepreneurial qualities, skills and behaviour 9. Analysing business process 10. Organizing and coordinating business processes 11. Introducing improvements to business processes 12. Keeping records, prepares reports and archived documents and files 14. Controlling the execution of business processes
<b>F. 2 Controlling the financials processes</b>			
10. Overview the financial situation of the company through their knowledge of	8. Manage the Accounting function: organise accounting duties, prepare tax	1.3 Controls the financial section (from the start) of the company	

SWITZERLAND Operational competencies	FRANCE Areas of expertise	NETHERLANDS Work processes	SLOVENIA Competencies
general accounting and cost accounting and annual reports.	declarations & year-end reports 9. Manage the day to day finances of the business : analyse documents, identify relevant indicators, prepare management recommendations	1.4 Creates an operating budget and liquidity budget 1.5 Monitors the financial position of the company 4.1 Manages the cash system 4.3 Operates the cash system 4.4 Closes the cash register and takes care of the financial administration	
<b>F. 3 Supervises and manage sales activities (about products and customers)</b>			
8. Introduce themselves and the own business to interest groups and optimally sell products and / or services.	11. Use sales techniques relevant to VSEs 12. Analyse the market and suggest an appropriate commercial strategy	1.8 Purchases for the company (products and / or services) 2.1 Manages and provides receipt of goods 2.2 Manages and provides storage of goods 2.3 Builds product presentations and takes care of them 2.4 Monitors the stock and orders 2.5 Develops procurement plans for the range of goods 2.6 Manages and provides retail shop and / or storage 3.1 Receives and approaching customers 3.2 Advises and conducts sales pitch 3.3 Provides branch-specific customization 3.4 Acquires orders / customers, makes quotations and / or negotiates 3.5 Place an order for the customer 3.6 Handles complaints 4.2 Informs the client about the sales processing	
<b>F. 4 Manage the Humans resources</b>			
6. Assume professional staff management: recruit and assign staff, motivate members of staff through modern means of communication	10. Human resources management in accordance to employment laws	1.9 Determines staffing 1:10 Consults with staff	1. Planning and organization of own work and the work of others 13. Leading employees and motivating them to achieve the objectives
<b>F. 5 Manage the communication processes and tools</b>			
	2. Communicate with the various internal & external partners 3. Identify IT & Communication tools relevant to the business requirements & what is on offer in the marketplace		7. Communicating with business partners, employees and other organizational units 8. Using modern information communication technology and software tools
<b>F. 6 Take into account the commercial, social and ecological environment</b>			
4. Understanding the links between the objective of the company and general conditions 7. Use and apply appropriately the tools of social responsibility (CSR)	6. Position the business within its environment		5. Protecting health and the environment
<b>F. 7 Takes into account her specificity how partner of enterprise owner</b>			

SWITZERLAND Operational competencies	FRANCE Areas of expertise	NETHERLANDS Work processes	SLOVENIA Competencies
11. Share the driving decisions and business risk run by his or her own and bear responsibility related the one activity area. 12. Discharge and supports / partner and other family members and preserve the interests of the family business. 13. Coordinate the own activities, those of members of staff of the / partner and family. 14. Clarify the influence of the family on the company and incorporate the features and active family needs within the company.	13. Organise the sales operation in collaboration with the business owner		

As we can see, some fields of activity are particularly strong in some countries and weak or absent in others. All of the partner countries consider, to varying degrees, Field 1: *Manage, monitoring and developing the business (organisation and processes)* and Field 4 *Manage the Humans resources*. In contrast, the context in which the business pursues its activities is considered in CH, F and S but not in NL (probably because the area of action of the occupation is more circumscribed). The field of activity relating to management of financial processes (Field 2) seems to be missing in Slovenia. This seems to confirm the observation made by this partner regarding the need to extend the list of competences of reference for the qualification considered. At the same time, it could also be due to the fact that these activities are included in Field 1. The management of communication processes and tools (Field 5) is absent in CH and NL. In this case as well we could assume that this is because the standards of reference are included in Field 1 and/or Field 4. Field 3: *Supervise and manage sales activities (about products and customers)* is particularly considered in NL, which we feel is due to the type of qualification (sales professional, most likely the owner or manager of a VSE), whereas it is likely that for the other partner countries, these activities are included in Field 1. Finally, Field 7: *F. 7 Takes into account the specific role as a partner of a business owner* is particularly strong in CH, but more limited in F, and absent in NL and S.

We feel that the differences resulting from the various types of qualification standards should serve as the basis for reflection and exchanges for each partner. The aim is not to standardise the different typologies - which is impossible anyway, since the decisions on qualification standards depend on the government bodies in each country - but rather to encourage mutual understanding of the cultural diversity present in each professional context as well as the possible integration of aspects that are missing in each typology. In particular, also in light of the objectives of the Women in SMEs project, it would be important for the various partners to develop a greater awareness of the competences that a spouse or partner of an owner must possess and develop in order to co-manage a company.

### 2.1.3 Reference curricula

References to the formal syllabus that must be followed in order to obtain the selected qualification enable us to better understand the scope of the VNIL process (no data available for Slovenia). However, it is not possible to compare the various syllabuses in detail because it is not possible to identify the actual differences in workload. What we can say is that the duration of each training programme is different and that they all seem to include an alternation between classroom instruction and work-based training.

#### 2.1.4 Conditions of access to validation

All partner countries require a minimum number of years of work experience (CH 8 years, F 3 years, NL 3 years, S 3-5 years). However, all of the partner countries recognise the importance of work experience consolidated over the years as a key factor ensuring success in the VNIL procedure.

#### 2.1.5 Assessor qualifications

For all of the partner countries, all assessors must have consolidated training and work experience in the field of the selected qualification. Each country provides this training (in CH and S, this training is mandatory), which lasts between one and three days. The topics covered are specific to the type of assessment methods and tools used in the VNIL procedure.

### 2.2 Validation standards

This category of standards enables us to identify the characteristics of the effective practices used in the validation process.

#### 2.2.1 Information, advice and guidance

The topics of information and consulting are covered in WP4 (Pilot of the coaching methodology with a group of spouses). Here, we would like to point out that in each country, information and consulting practices are a regular feature of the validation procedure. Moreover, the consulting strategy for the given qualifications will be the subject of transfer from Switzerland to the partner countries, with the necessary adjustments to the possibilities and requirements of the various national contexts.

#### 2.2.2 Assessment methods

For all of the qualifications of reference, the assessment methods are based on national VNIL practices. Therefore, in Switzerland and France, assessment methods are based on assessment portfolios and interviews with candidates. In contrast, greater emphasis is placed on performance assessments in the Netherlands (optional) and in Slovenia (predominantly). In Slovenia, analysis of good portfolio practices has led to a decision to include this tool in the existing VNIL procedure for the qualification "Business Organiser of a Small or Family Company" (this possibility does not yet exist in the current VNIL procedure), since the portfolio approach is considered to be particularly effective (see § 3).

In particular, in Switzerland, the assessment procedure is divided into two levels, reflected in two different portfolios: one aimed at demonstrating specific competences for each area of training and the other aimed at demonstrating transversal competences. These two different levels do not exist in the other partner countries, which use a single assessment portfolio. Another aspect observed was the structured approach to self-assessment practices in CH and NL compared to F and S where this is not explicitly mentioned. Moreover, this phase of self-assessment is part of the aspects to be transferred within the framework of the Women in SMEs project and will therefore be addressed by each partner.

#### 2.2.3 Jury practice

The practices of those involved in assessments during the VNIL procedure differ in many respects but are also similar in some respects. First of all, there is the number of assessors involved: two for Switzerland and the Netherlands, three for Slovenia and four or more for France. Designated by the bodies in charge of the

validation procedure, these assessors represent the professional sphere of reference, in some cases the education institutions of reference or other stakeholders involved. At the end of the assessment procedure, assessors draft a report explaining the reasons leading to the decisions taken. This report is sent to the institutions that issue the qualification in question. Moreover, in the Netherlands, the document issued (Experience Certificate) may be used directly by the candidate to negotiate with the body to which he/she seeks recognition of prior learning gained outside of the framework of the education system. Finally, even if the role of advisors and assessors are clearly distinct in each country, in NL, the assessor provides feedback to the candidate regarding the possibility of using the Experience Certificate.

#### 2.2.4 Material or instruments

A wide range of materials are available to help candidates or assessors during the VNIL procedure. Both are provided with documentation on VNIL regulations as well as on qualification standards. In addition, for candidates, CH and NL provide guidelines and/or a template to help them prepare their assessment portfolio (in hardcopy or digital format) as well as reference grids for assessment; whilst for F and S, these materials will be elaborated within the framework of the Women in SMEs project. CH and NL also offer online tools to perform self-evaluation. In addition to the standards of reference, assessors are also provided with the following: standardised materials to express validation (CH), a guidebook on assessing candidates (F), detailed instructions on how to conduct interviews with candidates during assessment (NL) as well as instructions on how to organise and assess practical examinations within a real or simulated context (NL). Furthermore, assessors in Slovenia must refer to ethical principles for assessment and certification of NVQ. Lastly, for F, NL and S, the materials intended specifically for the Women in SMEs project are currently being elaborated.

### 2.3 Certification standards

Certification standards allow one to identify the aspects that justify formal recognition of non-formal and informal learning within the context of the VNIL procedure used. Mention is therefore made of the following: the bodies that grant certification and establish regulation practices; the criteria to be met in order to pass the assessment; and the forms of remedy provided for in the case of partial or complete failure of the procedure.

#### 2.3.1 Responsibility

Responsibility for issuing certification is shared by various providers, authorised by the government of reference. For Switzerland, it is the Committee for Quality Assurance, delegated by the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI); for France, it is the National Committee of Chambers of Crafts, delegated by the National Qualification Commission; for the Netherlands it is a VET College (not yet identified the specific) authorised by the Kenniscentrum EVC (Dutch Knowledge Centre APL); for Slovenia, it is the institution (not yet identified) authorised by the RIC (National Examinations Centre for NVQ procedures).

#### 2.3.2 Criteria

Switzerland and France have established grading scales that enable the competences of candidates to be validated on the basis of the points awarded. In particular, Switzerland uses grading scales for the various levels of assessment (self-assessment, evidence portfolio, performance portfolio). In France, grading scales are used for each general area of expertise. As for NL and S, the data are currently being elaborated.

### 2.3.3 Regulation practice

At the end of the validation procedure, there are three possible outcomes: complete success, partial success, failure. In the case of complete success, France and Switzerland issue a qualification that is identical to the one obtained by means of the formal programme. In the case of partial recognition, the candidates are issued certificates for individual modules/areas of expertise. For its part, NL issues an Experience Certificate, which enables the candidate to negotiate the form of formal recognition to be obtained from the various certification or accreditation bodies. This Experience Certificate is also issued in the case of partial acquisition of competences. Moreover, for the qualification selected within the Women in SMEs project, the specific references used by NL are still being elaborated. For Slovenia, given the pilot nature of the project, the specific references are also still being elaborated.

### 2.3.4 Remediation

In the case of partial validation or failure of the procedure, candidates in both France and Switzerland have five years to complete the validation process and/or submit a new file. Moreover, in France, the examination board's decision is final and there is no appeal possible should the candidate be awarded the desired validation or not. Specifically, an education examination panel has no influence on a decision by a VNIL examination board. In the Netherlands, however, since the experience certificate is not directly considered as certification, the regulations are not as binding with regards to possible repetition of the procedure. In addition, the assessor and the candidate both sign the report concerning issuance of the experience certificate and are required to discuss any points over which they disagree. Candidates also have the possibility of challenging the outcome of the validation procedure (within the established timeframe). Moreover, if a candidate seeks further advice on how to proceed (for instance in case of failure to access their chosen qualification), there is always advice available at the VET College. In Slovenia, consideration is currently being given to various ways to support those who fail to pass the procedure: additional counselling, peer-learning with other spouses, consultation with consultants and/or spouses and experts of particular field of knowledge. Other aspects are still being elaborated.

### 3. Best practices in assessing validation portfolios

This chapter summarises the main points that emerged from the surveys conducted with our partners to identify some examples of good practice associated with validation portfolio assessment methods. The good practices did not have to relate to the target group in this project. However, they had to relate in all cases a practical assessment (i.e. not merely a practice of recognising non-formal and informal learning). The exploration carried out for this deliverable was intended to enable each of the partners to compare the procedure established for the Women in SMEs project with other portfolio practices in order to derive operational indications. For this reason, we will take the main aspects obtained from the data received (5 survey, two for Switzerland, one each for France, Netherlands and Slovenia), particularly the indications obtained from analysis of the strong points and weak points of the various projects. For more details, we encourage our partners to read the reciprocal reports.

#### 3.1 General information

##### 3.1.1 Qualifications of reference

The cases considered are listed below:

- Switzerland A: Swiss Federal PET diploma for Trainers in Further education - EQF level 5. Number of people involved from 2001 till 2013: about 1100 people.
- Switzerland B: Master for occupational, educational and career guidance counsellor - EQF level 7. Number of people involved: from 2007 till 2011: about 40 people<sup>4</sup>.
- France: Vocational secretarial baccalaureate (EQF level 3). Number of people involved in 2012: 855 candidates applied for this qualification, which represents 1.8% of all applications in this particular year.
- Netherlands: The Rockwool's career management & personal development in the workplace (different levels of EQF). Number of people involved from 2003 till 2013: 77 employees in a multiple VNIL-procedure and 9 in a single VNIL procedure.
- Slovenia: Slovenian National Vocational Qualification System (different levels of EQF). Number of people involved from 2000 till 2012: 67.941 NVQ certificates issued. Most popular are the ones related to agriculture and hand craft.

These examples show that portfolio assessment practices may be used at various levels of training and for many different types of occupations. However, it is important to consider the fact that for NL and S, portfolio practices are one of the possible forms of assessment (not necessarily used for all qualifications) whereas for France and Switzerland, portfolios are the main assessment tool used in VNIL procedures. In addition, for qualification A, from Switzerland, the candidate may choose to prepare a "less documented" portfolio and undergo assessment by way of a work-place examination.

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<sup>4</sup> For this case, in addition to the official documentation and the interview with two field testimonials, we also refer to the report: Weber Guisan, S. (2010). *Validation of prior learning for occupational, educational and career guidance counsellors. Case study submitted within the context of the Leonardo-Observal project*. Lausanne: IFFP.

### 3.1.2 Advising and assessment process

For each qualification, an information and initial consulting session is arranged. However, during preparation of the portfolio, consulting services are optional or limited. For each of the cases described, candidates nevertheless are provided with detailed information and support (in hardcopy or digital form) to help them prepare their portfolio. In most cases, the assessment process is based on analysis of the portfolio and an interview with the candidate. This is not the case for Switzerland A, where certification is granted or denied solely on the basis of analysis of the portfolio.

### 3.1.3 Stakeholder and quality assurance

For these aspects, it is possible to refer to the information obtained from WP2 and from analysis contained in the previous pages.

## 3.2 Specific information

### 3.2.1 Guide or other indications

In Table 4, we once again present the data concerning the indications and support provided to candidates to help them prepare their portfolio. As can be seen, apart from the various linguistic formulations, each candidate receives a drafting guide and reference materials (standards of qualifications, assessment criteria). In some cases, candidates also receive a structured template containing specific questions. This template serves as a further aid in the preparation of the portfolio.

**Table 4: Indications for the preparation of portfolios from the case studies**

<b>CH A - SWISS FEDERAL PET DIPLOMA FOR TRAINERS IN FURTHER EDUCATION</b>
<p>Each candidate receives a guide and other supporting documents to help prepare the portfolio. The candidate must show evidence of their competencies by comparing the competency profile with their own work as an adult educator and their existing competencies. A self-assessment form must be filled in for each module for which the candidate seeks credit.</p> <p>All of the documents are collected and filed in the assessment portfolio. There are two different ways in which candidates may demonstrate the competencies that they gained through formal or informal means.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Providing supporting documents: Candidates use the self-assessment form to clearly present their competencies in delivering adult education in written form. Relevant supporting documents are enclosed as proof. These may take the form of continuing education and training certificates and/or work references attesting that the candidate possesses the necessary competencies. With this option, the assessment outcome will be based on the merit of these supporting documents alone.</li><li>2. Demonstrating competencies: Candidates use the self-assessment form to clearly present their competencies in delivering adult education in written form. However, the candidate has no relevant supporting documents to prove that he/she possesses the necessary competencies. With this option, the assessment outcome will be based on the competencies demonstrated by candidates (e.g. observation of the candidate's classes). This is described in the provider's prospectus. The assessment portfolio is compiled in the same manner regardless of which of the two options is chosen. The only difference between the two options is the lack of supporting documents and the need to demonstrate the required competences with option 2.</li></ol>
<b>CH B - MASTER FOR OCCUPATIONAL, EDUCATIONAL AND CAREER GUIDANCE COUNSELLOR</b>
<p>In order to create their portfolios, several documents are available to the candidates, notably:</p> <p>The Competency Profile for Occupational, Educational and Career Guidance Counsellors, 14 which is their main referential. This profile is composed of the Occupational Profile, the Overview of Operational Competencies and the Requirements for the Occupation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– The profile is made up of thirteen competency areas. Each competency area is divided into operational competencies, linked to assessment criteria.</li></ul>

- The essential competencies that were the easiest to validate during the pilot project were “Counselling”, “Conducting interviews”, “Informing” and “Leading a session”. The biggest challenge, especially for non-psychologists, was “Diagnosing/assessing”.
- The Requirements for Obtaining the Title of “Occupational, Educational and Career Guidance Counsellor” (this document describes how competencies are assessed)
- The How to Prepare an Assessment Portfolio for the Validation of Prior Learning in Occupational, Educational and Career Guidance 16 (the objective of this guide is to help the candidate with the task of creating an assessment portfolio)

Each candidate must structure his or her portfolio in a way that highlights his or her experiences and competencies and shows how they relate to the competencies listed in the competency profile. For this type of occupation, being able to create and present an assessment portfolio is considered to be a skill in itself. Nonetheless, many candidates submitted very descriptive portfolios and did not really demonstrate their progress towards achieving the required competencies, according to an assessor's opinion.

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#### **F: VOCATIONAL SECRETARIAL BACCALAUREATE**

Following the confirmation of eligibility, the candidate will receive instructions to prepare the portfolio and the validation folder. These instructions include information and recommendations for the completion of portfolio. This is provided by the accompanying authority, the DAVA (Academic Delegation for the Validation of Acquired Experience) and consists of a structured questionnaire which enables to list and describe in detail the acquired experience, knowledge and skills in relation with the desired diploma.

A possible structure would be « Organisation / Sheet O », « Job / Sheet E », « Activities /Sheet A ».

The candidate is required to describe a minimum of 4 activities.

The number system allows for quick reference to the Job and Organisation in which the activity took place. This reference system is particularly useful for the members of examination panel.

The diploma benchmarks are supplied in order to choose the relevant activities to be described. There are guidelines on the quality of presentation of portfolio, the mandatory documents and paperwork to be supplied, where to obtain the diploma benchmarks and a technical glossary.

Deadlines for the application are also specified.

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#### **NL: THE ROCKWOOL'S CAREER MANAGEMENT & PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE WORKPLACE**

##### **Items of the portfolio :**

- Name and address of the candidate,
- Candidate's motivation to go for a VPL procedure,
- Curriculum vitae: description of work experiences and education-history,
- Motivation of the candidate regarding learning and/or working goals,
- Self-evaluation or self-assessment, related to the standard used,
- Evidence to support the self-evaluation (professional products).
- In addition to the practical examples the portfolio contains STARRT-forms for describing and demonstrating every single claim for a competence

if relevant:

- diplomas, certificates or testimonials of courses followed in which knowledge and skills have been acquired and which are related to the self-assessment.

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#### **S: SLOVENIAN NATIONAL VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATION SYSTEM**

##### **Contents and structure of the candidate's personal portfolio:**

1. Candidate's presentation and compliance with special terms
    - Europass CV format. The counsellor has to appropriately substantiate the selection of a different model.
    - Proof attesting to the candidate's compliance with special terms of the catalogue of expertise and skills standards.
  2. Candidate's work experience
    - Supporting documents attesting to prior work experience (work contract, reference letters, statement by employers...).
  3. Education and training
    - Supporting documents attesting to participation and/or completion of educational or training programmes.
    - Candidate has to submit supporting documents which he/she lists in a CV and which are in substance linked to the qualification, but do not constitute entry requirements for NVQ: certificates, diplomas, other supporting documents demonstrating the completion of study obligations and similar, certificate issued by education and training providers testifying to the successful completion of education or training, licence, training certificate issued by a company etc.
  4. References
    - If the candidate states in his/her CV that he/she already acquired work experience in the professional field and is in a position to obtain reference letters from former employers or customers, he/she should be encouraged to obtain
-

them.

The candidate is also stimulated to document his/her work experience depending on individual qualifications.

The following evidence can be taken into consideration:

- performed practical work in the workplace (product, model, programme and similar);
- written document the candidate elaborated in the workplace (e.g. finished project, plan, development task, research, expert’s detailed report, paper, analysis, essay, evaluation report, translation of a document, annual accounts of a small enterprise, establishment plan of a company and similar);
- provided service in the workplace.
- The candidate can also prove his/her work experience in different ways: e.g. competition awards, products, articles, authorship or co-authorship of books and other publications.
- The candidate has to demonstrate beyond any doubt that a product or provided service is in fact his/her work, also in case of group (project) work. Authorship can be proven by written statements by employers, project managers, awards, patents, photographs and similar.

### 3.2.2 Testimonials

Each partner, except for NL, interviewed various respondents who had direct experience with portfolio practices (Table 5). A total of six candidates, five assessors and one counsellor were interviewed. This enabled the partners involved to see up close the specific experiences of those who have gone through a validation procedure and identify the strong points and weak points of these practices.

**Table 5: Testimonials gathered during the survey.**

SWITZERLAND A	SWITZERLAND B	FRANCE	SLOVENIA
2 candidates 1 assessor	1 candidate 1 assessors	1 candidate 2 assessors	1 counsellor 1 candidate with portfolio 1 candidate without portfolio 1 assessor

### 3.2.3 Strength and weakness

In the following Table 6, we present the detailed observations about strength and weakness of the portfolio procedures analysed by the partners. Later we present a synthesis of the strong points and weak points associated with the use of portfolios in VNIL procedures.

**Table 6: Strengths and weaknesses of the portfolio tools analysed**

SWITZERLAND A - SWISS FEDERAL PET DIPLOMA FOR TRAINERS IN FURTHER EDUCATION	
<i>strengths</i>	<i>weaknesses:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 2 possible routes for the validation (Version I, Version II) depending on participants’ needs and affinities,</li> <li>– 15 years’ of experience, process and tools evaluated by the Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz (guarantee of quality),</li> <li>– a process that has evolved according to the needs and specific constraints of its target group;</li> <li>– all information and documents are available on the Internet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– difference between the expected workload for Version I and the expected workload for Version II</li> </ul>

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**SWITZERLAND B- MASTER FOR OCCUPATIONAL, EDUCATIONAL AND CAREER GUIDANCE COUNSELOR**


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<i>strengths</i>	<i>weaknesses:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Good general coordination from provider of this qualification</li> <li>– Good interaction between the provider, the assessors and candidates</li> <li>– Exchange platform for assessors, solutions found jointly</li> <li>– Profile of competence and procedure very detailed and structured for a VNIL on the University level.</li> <li>– Information and Quality System very accurate</li> <li>– Competency profile suitable for the profession</li> <li>– Creation of a new professional identity, valorisation of the specificities and complexity of the profession.</li> <li>– Enrichment of the occupation by opening it up to other disciplines</li> <li>– Sizeable pool of candidates</li> <li>– Anticipate the next decade's shortage of guidance counsellors</li> <li>– Affordable alternative to obtain a recognised</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Demanding admission requirements (three years at 80%: part-timers are penalised in this female-dominated occupation; tertiary-level A (or equivalent qualification). The term equivalent has not yet been clearly defined. In addition, not everyone is in favour of awarding the title to holders of tertiary-level B qualifications)</li> <li>– Conditions for success are not always aligned with VNIL principles (competencies are dissected and not really considered as processes)</li> <li>– The work for candidates can be very challenging and the support (counselling-advising) is weak</li> <li>– Some candidates would like to have had sample assessment portfolios as well as a methodology workshop</li> <li>– For the assessors, reading and evaluation of the dossier can take a long time.</li> </ul>

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**FRANCE: VOCATIONAL SECRETARIAL BACCALAUREATE**


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<i>strengths</i>	<i>weaknesses:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– A national program that is consistent and strong and provides guidelines applicable to all the certifications that it recognises.</li> <li>– An evaluation system devised solely for the VNIL and that is totally different from that of evaluation in formal training in its organisation, its form and its requirements.</li> <li>– Quality information for who wants to find it (RNCP).</li> <li>– A network of agents and advisors under the umbrella of the Regions, on the ground and close to potential candidates</li> <li>– Support and guidance providers with an ever increasing professionalism thanks to mandatory training, information and exchange centres and a role defined by a charter.</li> <li>– The mandatory appointment of professionals on examination panels, their independence with regards to the candidates: code of conduct, creation of regional panels...</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– A system of certification that still lacks recognition because of the overwhelming preference for a diploma acquired through formal training.</li> <li>– A lack of information for the people concerned: businesses, employees, job seekers.</li> <li>– A system of certification that is still more popular for lower level qualifications (level V) and in some sectors such as the personal care industry which suffers from a lack of qualifications.</li> <li>– Businesses which weren't well informed and weren't committed to the VAE: the number of employees put forward by their employer remains low. The VAE is not (yet) used as a tool in human resources management.</li> <li>– A demanding process that discourages many candidates (high dropout rates) due to the written work required.</li> <li>– A system that is at times too strict especially in the case of the identification early on of an available training program which could fill the knowledge gaps.</li> <li>– The reason is that only the panel can decide on what constitutes a lack of expertise. However, in practice, an advisor who has in-depth knowledge of the content of a particular diploma is able to identify the competencies gaps from the beginning of the process.</li> <li>– It must be a constant preoccupation to avoid setting candidate up for failure.</li> <li>– With time, the presidents specialise in a particular diploma but in principle, they can't be consulted when making the decision of eligibility of a candidate.</li> <li>– Even though the deliberations must remain confidential, it would be interesting to develop cooperation between advisors and examination panels with the purpose of better understanding each</li> </ul>

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	<p>other's working methods, requirement levels... The objectives, scope and limitations of this cooperation remain to be defined.</p> <p>For the candidates :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The feeling of starting an « obstacle course »</li> <li>- The challenge of revisiting one's professional life in order to move forward.</li> <li>- The difficulty of having to produce written work to describe one's expertise.</li> <li>- The lack of experience in analysing one's work in terms of expertise.</li> <li>- The time required to complete booklet 2.</li> </ul> <p>For the panels :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The difficulty in explaining its reference system and to share it with others.</li> <li>- The need for a group exercise to define ground rules prior to the interviews with the candidates</li> <li>- A meeting prior to an interview with a candidate in order to identify the points to clarify and the questions to be asked.</li> <li>- The necessity to have a stable panel (or at least a core set of members) in order to capitalise on the experience gained for a given certification.</li> </ul> <p><i>What other form of validation of expertise could be introduced? Oral presentation with the support of concise documents, work based validation, mix group and individual support and guidance services, development of business simulation exercises, self-assessment... Reflection and experimentation will still need to evolve.</i></p>
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**NETHERLANDS : THE ROCKWOOL'S CAREER MANAGEMENT & PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE WORKPLACE**

<i>strengths</i>	<i>weaknesses:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In terms of methodology: the use of VPL in a multiple formative targeted policy for empowerment, employability and qualification. This multiple VPL is used at Rockwool for linking 3 purposes: the purpose of empowerment of the employee (knowing who you are and you mean to your context), an employee's learning needs (knowing how to invest best in yourself) and horizontal and/or vertical employability chances (knowing where to come to your best).</li> <li>- Apart from this VPL Rockwool developed an internal single formative VPL procedure for employees within their function group. It enhances broad commitment to the VPL policy of Rockwool. This opened up career chances of employees which were traditionally at the final stage of their career.</li> <li>- The newly developed VPL ('process competence assessment') rewards people's functioning within their function group and seeks learning opportunities that can enhance the existing functioning. It strengthens in fact the positive attitude of the employee involved and builds up empowerment within the functioning.</li> <li>- The impact on the cost effectiveness of the company's HRM.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rockwool is a big company; in SMEs this policy is difficult to copy.</li> <li>- The policy is strongly linked to national qualifications. This is a strength but also a weakness since with this the company's lifelong learning strategy is depending on the willingness of a VET school to validate the workers' competences.</li> </ul>

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**SLOVENIA: SLOVENIAN NATIONAL VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATION SYSTEM**


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<i>strengths</i>	<i>weaknesses:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The survey enabled us to confirm that portfolio-based validation procedures enable candidates to present their own experience more effectively. For this reason, if NVQ for SMEs accountants will be supplemented with suggestions deriving from this project, then our target group (spouses in SMEs) would wish to have an portfolio option (weakness so far)</li> <li>– A widely recognized and valued system with established institutional network and assured quality.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– In some cases, there is a need to better coordinate the actions of the various actors involved in the assessment procedure.</li> <li>– Self-evaluation questionnaires will probably result which kind of knowledge should be provided in a form of modular trainings.</li> <li>– Counsellors will have to be familiarized with those new contents, conditions (related to spouses in SMEs) as well as assessors.</li> </ul>

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**Synthesis of the strong points**

- Availability of different types of structured documentation to help candidates prepare their portfolio
- The process of preparing a portfolio is both educational and informative
- Usually, the various actors involved coordinate their activities well
- The possibility of being assessed by a "non-scholastic" tool
- The information and consulting provided to candidates during the process of preparing their portfolio (in cases where such information and consulting is available)
- The relatively low cost of the portfolio procedure compared to other assessment tools/methods.
- The ethics and fairness of assessors.

**Synthesis of the weak points**

- The considerable amount of effort needed to prepare a portfolio and the difficulty associated with circumscribing the scope of the portfolio.
- Often there is a lack of concrete examples
- The difficulty encountered when trying to describe one's own experience in writing
- In some cases, the complexity of qualifications standards
- In some cases, the lack of methodological support provided to candidates when preparing their portfolio
- The amount of time that assessors need to analyse the portfolio
- The difficulty of performing an initial assessment prognosis, which would help to avoid candidates failing the validation procedure.
- A system of certification that still lacks recognition because of the overwhelming preference for a diploma acquired through formal training.
- A lack of information for the people concerned: businesses, employees, job seekers.

## 4. Conclusions and recommendations

Cross-cutting analysis of the rich and extensive material provided by the partners revealed the many different ways in which validation procedures can be carried out in the Women in SMEs project. In this conclusion, we mention some of the main aspects identified. We also share several general thoughts on the factors that may favour or hinder completion of the project itself.

As far as the **characteristics of the qualifications of reference** are concerned, we noted that while all of these characteristics related to the desired professional area (management of SMEs), the countries benefitting from the innovation transfer project needed to make the following adjustments:

- For the Netherlands, a partial modification of target group was needed, considering some of the project's ultimate objectives. A decision was therefore reached to focus on women who seek a job in general and for that reason need more insight in their talents and access to a certain qualification.
- For Slovenia, there was a need to include competences specifically relating to co-management of an SME in the standards for acquisition of the selected qualification.
- For France and the Netherlands, there was a need to adjust assessment requirements used in the VNIL procedure, given the differences between level 4 and level 5 of the EQF. As it happens, the requirements for level 5 are higher not only in terms of the extension of knowledge and skills but above all in terms of awareness, managerial capacities, problem-solving, and the ability to supervise one's own activities and those of others.

For all of the **process standards**, we noted the following aspects:

### Assessment or evaluation standards

While all four of the projects refer to occupational standards, they do not all use the same qualification standards. Each country refers to its own categorisation and terminology (and in some cases even use several categorisations) when defining areas of competence for the qualification standard. There are also different levels of complexity in the structure of standards, which makes understanding the standards easier or more difficult. We therefore established a general categorisation in an attempt to make the various descriptors comparable. This enables us to highlight the different weights given to each area of activity (§ 2.1.2). We feel that these differences should serve as the basis for reflection for each partner and if possible lead to reciprocal adaptations. Moreover, in light of the objectives of the Women in SMEs project, it would be important for the various partners to develop a greater awareness of the competences that a spouse or partner of an owner must possess and develop in order to co-manage a company owner. At the same time, we wish to point out that the conditions for gaining access to the VNIL procedure are similar, as is the process and model of training assessors.

### Validation standards

In terms of the characteristics of the effective validation practices, there are many similarities between the partner countries: the modalities of information and consulting (which will at any rate be harmonised as the

project progresses), the assessment methods used – despite differences observed in two countries (CH-F), the assessment methods are still mostly portfolio-based; for their part, NL and S rely more on performance-based assessments. Moreover, in Slovenia, analysis of good portfolio practices has led to a decision to include this tool in the existing VNIL procedure for the Women in SMEs project, since the portfolio approach was considered to be particularly effective.

We also noted specific differences in the approach to assessment. First of all, there is the number of assessors involved: two for Switzerland and the Netherlands, three for Slovenia and four or more for France. In addition, the effective outcome of the procedure may be one of direct certification (CH, F, S) or indirect certification (NL) through issuance of an experience certificate that is then used by the candidate to request formal recognition or accreditation from the institutions of reference for the desired qualification. We should also point out that for some of the partners, some of the aspects of this process (as it relates to the qualification selected for the Women in SMEs project) are still being elaborated.

As far as the materials and tools proposed, we observed a very broad range of available options to assist both candidates and assessors. We recommend that all of the partner countries examine these materials in order to learn from one another on this subject.

#### Certification standards

For all of the countries, responsibility for issuing certification falls upon the provider authorised to do so by the government body. NL and S are still in the process of identifying a specific provider related to project. As far as the assessment criteria and weighting scale are concerned, the references for CH and F are complete but those for NL and S still need to be developed. In the case of partial validation or failure of the procedure, candidates in France and Switzerland have five years to complete the validation process and/or submit a new dossier. In NL and S, the specific references are still being elaborated. In terms of remedies at the end of the VNIL procedure, each country offers candidates the possibility of formally challenging the outcome. However, the practices in CH and F do not seem very well structured. In NL, the assessor plays a particular role in the sense that he/she tells the candidate how the experience certificate may be used and explains the possible integrations. In S, specific forms of consulting and support are planned.

With regards to the **survey of good assessment practices** through the use of portfolios, we would like to highlight the considerable effort made by some of the partner countries to identify useful practices for this project and to gather multiple testimonials. This enabled both the strong points and weak points of these practices to be identified. Here it is worth mentioning the concluding thoughts expressed by partner 4, concerning various weak points found in the portfolio approach: *What other form of validation of expertise could be introduced? Oral presentation with the support of concise documents, work based validation, mix group and individual support and guidance services, development of business simulation exercises, self-assessment... Reflection and experimentation will still need to evolve.*

To conclude, we would like to thank the partner countries for all of the interesting materials provided to us. We hope that the outcome of the survey for WP3 will facilitate greater harmonisation between the projects pursued by each partner.