



Europeerguid-RVC

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING/VALIDATION OF NON- FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

Europeerguid-RVC WP2 report

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0. Introduction

“Validating non-formal and informal learning is increasingly seen as a way of improving lifelong and lifewide learning. A rapidly growing number of countries emphasize the importance of making visible and valuing learning taking place outside formal education and training institutions, at work, in the home and during leisure time activities.” (CEDEFOP, 2009). The Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012/C 398/01) states that *“member states should have in place, no later than 2018, in accordance with national circumstances and specificities, and as they deem appropriate, arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning”* and encourages them to strengthen the quality management in the RVC. Thus, the RVC is clearly one of the key elements of developing lifelong learning and contribute to the creation of the knowledge based economy. Recognition of prior learning can improve the mobility of individuals, promote efficiency of VET systems and equality of opportunities, facilitates the development of lifelong learning systems and addresses sectoral needs (Policy brief, 2008).

This report was produced within the framework of the Work Package 2 of the Europeerguid-RVC Leonardo da Vinci project. The project is implemented in the period 2014 – 2015 and is an extension of previous projects from the field of peer review (Peer Review in Initial Training, Peer Review Extended, Peer Review Extended II and Europeerguid). Partners from four countries (Portugal, France, Netherlands, Austria) are involved in different project activities and work packages with the aim to transfer and adapt the Peer Review methodology to the field of Recognition of prior learning (known under different names in some countries, e.g. *“Recognition and validation of competences”*). In the framework of the peer-review, pre-defined quality areas that are assessed during peer visits play a major role in assuring the standardization and transparency of the process. The objective of this report is to serve as a base for the elaboration of common quality criteria that will be used as a quality assurance framework in the specific context of the peer review.

Methodology

Three methodological approaches were used in order to facilitate the definition of common quality areas for peer review in RVC:

1. Literature review

Different publications, recommendations and research papers mapping current practices in RPL were used as a starting point for the elaboration of the questionnaire that was used in the following phase. Our research focused on documents that were specifically dealing with the question of quality assurance in RPL on European (e.g. European Commission recommendations, CEDEFOP studies etc.) or national levels (national quality codes and regulations), or parts of other documents of a more general focus, that were relevant for the quality assurance in RPL. A list of sources is included in this report. The advantage of this approach is that it allowed us to take into account a wider European context as well as avoid the risk of omitting some aspects of the RPL quality assurance that are not present in the practices in the countries that were further examined.

2. Questionnaires for analyzing QA measures and practices in RPL centres

Based on the findings from literature review, a detailed questionnaire covering different phases of the RPL procedure was elaborated and filled in by experts representing six RPL providers in three partner countries

(2 from Portugal, 2 from Netherlands, 2 from France). Based on the findings from the literature review, the questionnaire was structured into 5 large areas of investigation:

- a. Access, welcoming and informing beneficiaries
- b. Counselling and accompaniment
- c. Assessment and validation
- d. Human and material resources
- e. Quality management

The questionnaire contained 47 items about different areas of practice that allowed the experts to evaluate the importance of the different areas of practice for the quality of the provided service on a 5-level scale and to describe concrete actions, implemented measures or corresponding national regulations related to the specific area of practice. The complete questionnaire is attached to this report.

3. Analysis and synthesis of the results

Main conclusions and recommendations were elaborated based on the analysis of the results from literature review and questionnaires. They are included in the final chapter of the report.

Choosing the right level of analysis

A question was raised by different partners concerning the level of analysis of the current systems of RVC. The *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning* include a following structuration for the analysis of RVC systems:

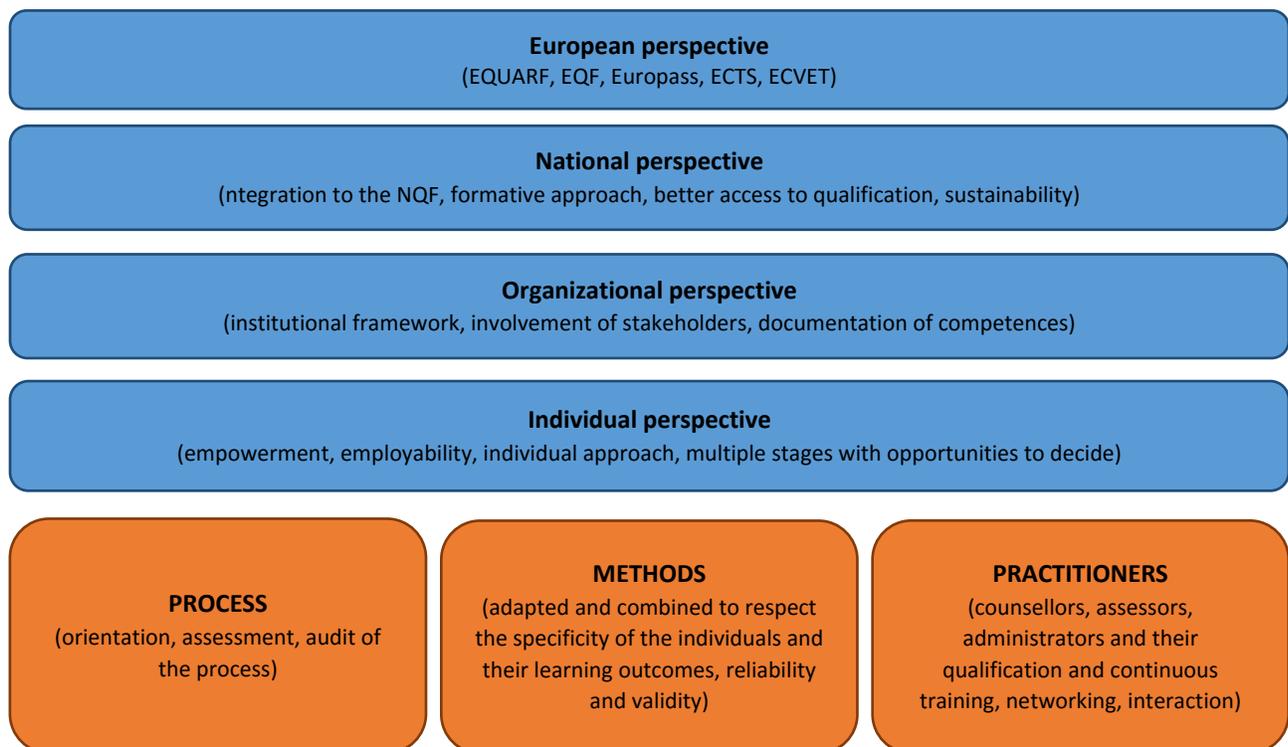


TABLE 1: LEVELS OF ANALYSIS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PEER REVIEW QUALITY AREAS

Taking into account the objective of the project – development of a comprehensive but operational list of quality areas and indicators to be during peer-review visits, as well as the differences in legal, institutional and organizational framework in different European countries, it was commonly agreed that the focus should be on the “individual perspective”. This level of analysis is focused on the factors that directly impact the quality of the RVC services as perceived by the individuals/beneficiaries (in terms of process, methods and intervening practitioners) and over which the institution providing RVC has at least some control.

1. Short literature overview on quality assurance in RVC

Historical experience of different countries lead to four pathways of implementation (Kleef, 2010): the first pathway is institutional and legislation-supported development of processes methods and tools for recognition and validation of prior learning, with educational institutions keeping most of the control over the certification (France, Czech republic). A second pathway focuses on assessment and recognition in the world of work, with an important role of employers (Netherlands). Third pathway is professional licensing of immigrant professionals (Canada) and the fourth pathway is focused on personal and social recognition through self-assessment and portfolio, without formal accreditation (*bilan de compétences* in France, recognition process in Netherlands).

This diversity of approaches also lead to different mechanisms for addressing quality assurance (Kleef, 2010), each of which has its specificities, advantages and disadvantages:

- legislation (France, Denmark, Czech Republic)
- government policy (Netherlands)
- collaborative mechanisms (UK, Scotland)
- institution-based mechanisms (US, Canada)
- indirect stakeholder support (US)

It is also important that the organization and the level of implementation of RVC differs greatly between European countries. Some countries have been experimenting with different approaches to RVC since years, some countries are still in the process of implementing the necessary infrastructure (National Qualification Framework, national system of qualifications, learning outcomes-based VET system etc.) that make the RVC possible. There are several key differences in the organization of the RVC on the policy level, that impact in a great way its practical implementation. Some of these differences are linked to the educational system of a given country, and sometimes both seemingly opposing principles are present in the RVC system of one country:

Centralized organization	Decentralized organization
Approach regulated on a national level, with a clear definition of key players and procedures of RVC by the central government (e.g. France). Wider recognition of outcomes is assured by regulatory measures of a central body.	RVC used on a regional or local level (often by companies) with common quality standards but regulated on a market demand basis (Netherlands). Recognition is assured by a mutual trust of involved stakeholders and common agreement of basic principles that is achieved through negotiation.
Holistic approach	Modularized approach
Validation gives access to holistic formal qualifications, with often most of the formal qualifications being accessible through validation (e.g. France).	Validation as a way of accessing sub-qualification units of learning, a non-formal certification (e.g. Czech republic) or an exemption/entry to training.
Summative accent	Formative accent

Accent is put on validation of a universally recognized certification, usually based on a national standard/referential.	Validation as a way of gaining personal and social recognition, granting an equivalence, credit unit or access to further training/education, not necessarily linked to acquiring a recognized certification.
Portfolio-based evaluation	Examination-based evaluation
Candidate is evaluated on the basis of a portfolio summarizing different knowledge, skills and competences developed through different experiences. Evaluation by a jury or a panel of experts has a complimentary role.	Candidate is evaluated on the basis of an oral assessment in front of a jury. Portfolio is not used at all, or has a secondary role, other proofs of sufficient experience can be used (Czech republic).

TABLE 2: DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO RVC IN EUROPE

Towards common RVC quality framework in Europe

RVC as an alternative but equivalent way of gaining a formal recognition of non-formally and informally acquired knowledge and skills has been gaining momentum in European Union since several years. Lafont and Pariat (2012) list following European-level documents and initiatives that touch upon the RVC:

European Principles for the Identification and Validation of non-formal and informal learning, or Recognition of Prior Learning (2004)

This document defines general principles as follows: *individual entitlement* (voluntary participation), *obligation of stakeholders* (also in quality assurance), *confidence and trust*, *credibility and legitimacy*.

Work of the cluster on Recognition of Learning Outcomes

Supports countries in developing national qualifications frameworks and systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The Cluster uses peer-learning activities to exchange good practice and channel collective efforts.

Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012

This document stipulates some basic principles of the validation in terms of the processes (*identification, documentation, assessment, and certification*) and basic principles:

- a) validation is linked to national qualifications framework in line with EQF
- b) information and guidance should be available
- c) particular focus on disadvantaged groups (e.g. unemployed)
- d) focus on documentation of skills through “skills audit”
- e) guidance and counselling are integral part of the process
- f) transparent quality framework should be transparent and assure the reliability, validity and credibility of the assessment
- g) professional development of the counsellors should be assured
- h) qualifications gained through validation should be the same or equivalent to formal qualifications
- i) promoting the use of the EU transparency tools (Europass, Youthpass...)
- j) creating synergies between validation and formal education.

Although these recommendations concern mainly the policy level, it is perhaps possible at least for some of them to assess to which extent the validation practices “on the field” respect these general guidelines.

The European Qualifications Framework

Encourages member states to implement National Qualification Framework and promote transparency of qualifications.

Europass

Set of documents that promotes transparency and enables individuals to visualize and validate their learning outcomes

The proposal for a European Skills, Competences and Occupations (ESCO)

Taxonomy of European skills, competencies and occupations that promotes common language for skills identification.

The Bologna Process in higher education and the European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning

Includes the recognition of prior learning as a way of acquiring a certification.

European Guidelines on Validation (2009)

Perhaps the most comprehensive publication in this field is the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning (CEDEFOP, 2009). This document is a result of several years of exchange of experience and is a *“practical tool providing expert advice to be applied on a purely voluntary basis”* (p.7). This document proposes the following underpinning quality indicators/ideas for validation practices:



TABLE 3: UNDERPINNING IDEAS OF QUALITY INDICATORS FOR VALIDATION (CEDEFOP, 2009)

The validation checklist that is part of this document proposes different quality indicators in terms of general conditions, professional requirements and outcome expectation of the RVC process. These recommendations are not obligatory and their implementation is voluntary. However, they form a precious source of inspiration not only for the implementation of the RVC system, but also for the establishment of quality areas. The assessment phase in particular is very well developed in this document and it first specifies the object of assessment:

- *Breadth of knowledge, skills and competences to be assessed;*
- *Depth of learning required;*

- *How current or recent are the knowledge, skills and competence;*
- *Sufficiency of information for an assessor to make a judgement;*
- *Authenticity of the evidence being the candidate's own (response to the specified) learning outcomes.*

...and then the different quality criteria for assessment tools:

- *Validity: the tool must measure what it is intended to measure;*
- *Reliability: the extent to which identical results would be achieved every time a candidate is assessed under the same conditions;*
- *Fairness: the extent to which an assessment decision is free from bias (context dependency, culture and assessor bias);*
- *Cognitive range: does the tool enable assessors to judge the breadth and depth of the candidate's learning;*
- *Fitness for purpose of the assessment: ensuring the purpose of the assessment tool matches the use for which it is intended.” (Ibid. pages 58-59. A range of methods are described and analysed in pages 59-65.)*

The validation checklist that is part of this document proposes different quality indicators in terms of general conditions, professional requirements and outcome expectation of the RVC process, as summarized in the following table.

These main European recommendations give a general framework for the implementation of RVC in member countries and can serve as a base for the elaboration of quality assurance framework. As the state of the implementation of the RVC differs between European countries, so does the level of implementation of national quality assurance framework and quality assurance procedures. In the following part we will focus on three countries that were involved in the Europeerguid-RVC project: France, Netherlands and Portugal.

Areas	Phase of the RVC process	Components
General conditions	Orientation phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visibility of the process Visibility for individuals Ethical behavior Appeal procedure Defining role of stakeholders Voluntary Owned by individual Flexible Trust
	Assessment phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Privacy and confidentiality Formative Encouraging psychology Access Impartiality Visibility of the process Ethical behaviour Appeal procedure Defining role of stakeholders Trust Focused on the individual Voluntary
Practical features	Orientation phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information Guidance and counselling Privacy and confidentiality Personal approach User-friendly Listening Fairness
	Assessment phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Standards / referential Qualified assessor Assessment methods Self-assessment Further orientation Transparency Authenticity Stakeholder involvement Implementation of the assessment instruments Assessment criteria Communication Appeal conditions
Professional knowledge	Orientation phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Education system Validation system Labour market Qualifications Legal provision Roles of other stakeholders
	Assessment phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment methods Validation process Qualification
Expected outcomes	Orientation phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear outcome for the individual Time and effort requirements Documentation of process
	Assessment phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Validation outcome Certification Record of individual achievement Satisfaction, further orientation Qualified human resources

TABLE 4: VALIDATION QUALITY CHECKLIST (CEDEFOP, 2009)

2. Quality assurance in RVC – country reports

France

General context of RVC

The current RVC in France is a result of a long historical process that has its roots in 1930s and began to formalize after the economic crisis in the 1970s. The rising unemployment accelerated the development of modular lifelong learning and the shift of the focus from formal certifications to learning outcomes that can be acquired independently of the learning environment, and that should be evaluated and validated (ECAP – *Evaluation des compétences et aptitudes professionnelles*). In 1985 the first relatively widely spread and systematic initiative in the field of validation was called “*Validation des acquis professionnels*” that served as an exemption for entering higher education and laid good basis for further development of the validation practice. Significant investments were made to develop educational standards (referentials) and formulate them in the way that allows validation (learning outcomes based on chunks of professional activities). In 1991 the logic of evaluation and recognition of skills and competences was reinforced by the generalization of the *bilan de compétences*. This device, although centred more on career counselling and not an integral part of the validation process, manifested the importance of a complex and professional guidance in fostering the personal and social value of the validation. In 2002 the validation path was extended to almost two thirds of the 18 000 different certifications that exist in France and the whole system was renamed to *Validation des acquis d’expériences* (VAE) – “Validation of prior experience”, to better reflect the holistic nature of individual career path.

Today, the RVC system in France places more emphasis on summative validation, where the attainment of a complete formal qualification is the ultimate objective. There is no difference between certification acquired through formal education and VAE. The VAE has become a legal right for everyone with at least three years of experience - A decree in December 2002 introduced the right for workers to a 24 hours paid leave to undertake a validation process. However, this time is often not sufficient for a complex guidance process that is required for the preparation of the personal validation dossier. Attainable certifications are classified in the RNCP catalogue (*Répertoire national des certifications professionnelles*) and are awarded by different bodies (ministries, training institutions, chambres...).

The VAE process is structured in the following phases:

Information	Assured by regional information points financed by public support from the regions or state (<i>Points Relais-Conseil VAE</i>). Regions have their autonomy in deciding which existing institutional network will assume the role of information points (usually CIBCs – centres of bilan de compétences, but in some regions it can be labour office or other network). Specialized counsellors work at these points and their role is to give basic information about the VAE process).
Counselling	Helping the candidate in their decision process about the type of certification to target and the validity (<i>recevabilité</i>) of their candidature. The role of the counsellor is to evaluate the length and the depth of the candidates experience and help him to make a decision to engage in the RVC. This phase is in most cases assured by the counsellors at the information points. The candidate sends the preliminary dossier to the certification organization that then decides about its validity and if the candidates meets the required conditions, the certification organization sends him the dossier.
Accompaniment	This phase is not obligatory and is carried – the accompaniment is offered by certification bodies or private organizations. This phase consists of the development of a portfolio (dossier)

	that links the candidates experience with a specific qualification standard. The accent is put on verbalization of working experience, but observation or simulation can sometimes be used to complete the portfolio. The length of the portfolio can vary based on the level of targeted certification, but usually is around 70-100 pages.
Jury	Interview with a panel composed by teachers and professionals from the given field. This interview touches mostly on certain points of the candidate's dossier that need to be clarified, but rarely touch theoretical knowledge.
Certification	The jury takes the decision on the deliberation of the certification that is then awarded by the certifying body.

TABLE 4: VALIDATION PROCESS IN FRANCE

Despite some resistance from the formal education sector (fear of decreasing the value of formal certification) and the challenges outlined in the following paragraphs, the introduction of the VAE system in France has been relatively successful and its credibility and attractiveness has been increasing every year since its introduction (30 000 certifications per year are delivered through VAE in average). Some challenges that the system needs to tackle are cited by Hawley (2007):

- increased burden on involved actors due to the growth of the demand,
- need to streamline the number of accessible qualifications and increase the transparency of the system,
- importance of forming partnerships with the private sector,
- need to increase the awareness about the VAE,
- variable quality of information, counselling and accompaniment,
- the VAE procedure is often very long (1 year in average)
- the VAE procedure relies heavily on the writing skills and self-analysis skills of the candidates and many candidates difficulties in describing and analyzing the activity
- difficulties of finding qualified jury members without conflict of interest, mostly in sectors with high number of SMEs.
- High drop-out rate during the process (in 2007, half of the people who initiated the first level contact with the VAE information points didn't continue in this process)
- Continuing reluctance and resistance of the formal education sector.

Quality assurance

The 2002 Social Modernization Act defines the general process and rules for the RVC, however, there is no quality assurance framework with precise quality standards and no formalized quality control processes exist. The quality assurance framework is embedded in the legal text that apply for all qualification:

- **the registration of the qualification in the RNCP,**
- **the standards has to be developed with participation of professionals,**
- **the composition of the jury,**
- **the result of the validation process**¹

The law defines in detail the conditions of the inscription of the qualification to RNCP (clear demand on the labour market, existence of the referential of activities and required competences etc. with clear evaluation

¹ Social modernisation act, 2002-73, <http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000408905&dateTexte&categorieLien=id#JORFSCITA000000911052>

criteria). So the rudimentary quality assurance framework is focused on the evaluation of the candidates and the end result of the process (certification).

The first level contact (information) is free of access for every citizen, afterwards the candidate has the choice to engage in accompaniment or prepare his dossier on his own. The accompaniment can be carried-out either by the certification bodies or by other organizations (private or public) – every certification body can sign an agreement and delegate the accompaniment to a specific organization or network. There is **no accreditation procedure for the accompaniment organizations**. There is no official national standard, but **certification organizations can define criteria for external providers** of accompaniment. There are several regional quality charts for accompaniment, but they are on a voluntary basis and contain general ethical and methodological principles.

Accompaniment is carried out in 6 phases:

1. Reflection about the place of the certification demand in the professional and personal project
2. Analysis of the professional and personal pathway
3. Interview with descriptive analysis of the activity
4. Assistance for describing of activities in the personal dossier
5. Preparation for the interview with the jury or
6. Preparation for the simulation.

Quality engagements for the accompaniment process:

- 1. Transparency of the process is assured during the reception**
 - Presentation and assignment of the personal counsellor of the beneficiary
 - Assuring the voluntary participation and informing about the possibility of free choice
 - Signature of an agreement with defined course and dates
- 2. Guaranteeing confidentiality**
- 3. Delivering quality service with respectable delays**
 - Clear definition of respective roles, responsibilities and methodology
 - Individualized approach is guaranteed in terms of duration, with the maximum delay of response of 30 days
 - Availability of all the necessary information (referential of targeted qualification, assessment procedures)
 - Personal ownership of the dossier/portfolio – the counsellor doesn't substitute the role of the candidate in its completion
 - Monitoring of the feedback of the beneficiaries
- 4. Mobilization of necessary resources**
- 5. Continuous training of intervening actors**
- 6. Cooperation and sharing of information between different actors**
- 7. Guaranteeing equal treatment of candidates and preventing discrimination**

TABLE 5: REGIONAL QUALITY CHART FOR THE VAE ACCOMPANIMENT (NORMANDY, FRANCE)

The most sensible point for the phase of assessment (jury) that takes place in accredited centres that have a lot of autonomy in the organization of the RVC procedure – there are considerable differences exist namely in the work of the juries, that some experts call “a black box”. It is difficult to assure a perfectly objective assessment of candidate’s knowledge and skills acquired through different experiences and compare it to a standardized qualification standard. Also, the majority of the assessors come from formal education and have a certain bias towards formal evaluation procedures and are rarely trained for VAE assessment.

The law and different decrees define the composition of the juries for different occupations with the following criteria:

- 1/4 of the jury is composed of **qualified representatives of the occupational sector** (with equal representation of employers and employees)
- **Equal representation of men and women**
- **Staff from the company where the candidates work, VAE counsellors who intervened in previous phases are excluded** from participating in the jury

A qualification can be obtained as a whole or only a part of the qualification can be obtained. In the latter case the jury is obliged to **propose ways for candidate to obtain the rest of the qualification** (further experience or training). In this way the jury doesn’t only assess the knowledge and skills of candidates, but also **gives value to experience and help him develop further.**

Netherlands

General context of RVC

The RVC system in Netherlands has been in development since around 2000 under the name *EVC – Erkennung van Verworven Competenties*. There is no specific laws about validation – the practice is embedded in existing laws from the educational sector (Duvekot, 2010). The RVC is used and developed in a decentralized way – until 2006 the policy focus was on fostering bottom-up approach in EVC development, increasing the participation of different stakeholders and the “change of the learning culture in general” (Duvekot, 2010). The vision, main principles and quality criteria are elaborated and maintained by the Knowledge Centre on Accreditation of Prior Learning (*Kenniscentrum EVC*), but most of the activities in the field of EVC are based on local initiatives of schools, companies, public authorities or the third sector. Since 2006 the approach has becoming more formalized with a focus on quality assurance, accessibility and transparency of the process.

Since 2013 the new government strategy that puts accent on “participation society” with the increased responsibility and ownership of stakeholders in lifelong learning also impacts the EVC as a formal practice for validation of learning outcomes, more closely linked to national qualifications and sector standards. This strategy leads to the development of three different levels of EVC: 1. Validation without link to national qualification standard, 2. Validation for career development and access to non-formal training (linkage to sector standards), 3. Validation linked to formal learning.

The EVC system is based on two different validation forms/pathways:

1. The “*Ervaringscertificaat*” – summative validation that targets a specific certification. The main approach here is to compare the experience of the candidate with at least one qualification standard and create a personal portfolio that is directly linked to this concrete qualification. The candidate is accredited a given number of credits from a training institution. Dutch qualification standards are formulated in a way that facilitate recognition of previously acquired skills. EVC in this particular usage is primarily an instrument for awarding exemptions or entrance to higher education programs. Today, it is in theory possible to obtain the full diploma, but this remains very difficult in practice.
2. The “*Ervaringsprofiel*” – formative validation that leads to the elaboration of a generic portfolio that makes a list of knowledge, skills and competences that a person developed during his career. On the basis of this portfolio a person can further plan his/her career (training, personal development, job seeking). In some sectors, the EVC is a part of the human resources development process, with a particular accent on labour mobility and employability.

From the procedural point of view, five distinct phases are always present in the EVC. The certification/exemption phase is formally not an integral part of the EVC process, as the training institutions have the final word on awarding certification/exemptions on the basis of the *Ervaringscertificaat*:

Information	Advising the candidate, the employer or the organization that thinks about engaging in the EVC process.
Intake	“ <i>Intake of the individual and making individual arrangements linked to the individual’s defined career goals. The candidate decides on the choice of qualification and whether to start the EVC procedure or not...</i> ” (Duvecot et al., 2014)
Recognition	Preparation of the portfolio with the support of a trained coach.

Validation/ assessment	Assessment is usually held directly at companies.
EVC report	Descriptions of the learning outcomes that match the specific certification. This report also contains advice on further professional development of the candidate in regards to his career goals. The certification or exemption is given by the awarding body (school, university...)

TABLE 6: VALIDATION PROCESS IN NETHERLANDS

The number of participants that take part in the first type of validation (*Ervaringscertificaat*) has increased by 60% between 2007-2009 and attained a record in 2011 (22 300), of which 65% were awarded by VET schools (MBO-levels, sector qualifications).

The evaluation of the Ministry of Education in 2010 identified following challenges in the EVC process in Netherlands:

- the Dutch Quality Code functions properly but there is a question of ownership. Specifically the decision about which organisations can inspect the providers of the *Ervaringscertificaat* needs to be regulated.
- the quality of the providers differs too much in implementing assessments,
- the outcomes of the assessments (*'Ervaringscertificaten'*) are not easily transferable between the providers.
- EVC was positioned as a market activity that is paid for by individuals or candidates, that can sometimes be a an obstacle for disadvantaged people
- There are some problems in the acceptance of the *Ervaringscertificaat*, with exam committees being reluctant to award credits and exemptions and ordered a new assessment of the portfolio
- Many educational institutes stopped offering EVC for some qualifications because of the small number of candidates (Duvecot et al., 2014)

Quality assurance

The National Quality Code for EVC was introduced in 2006 in order to increase the transparency, accessibility and impact of EVC. It was revised in 2012 in order to become a tripartite governed instrument. Accredited EVC centres are listed in a central database, but the use of the Quality Code remains voluntary. There is a national system of accreditation of EVC providers that is based on audit visits of external assessors and self-evaluation of RVC centres.

The quality code contains a relatively detailed description of activities, instruments, documents and involved stakeholders for different quality criteria and is structured into five main areas, with several important areas highlighted in the following synthesis:

1. Objectives of EVC

- Employability and personal development is the main objective
- Competences are evaluated on the basis of national qualification standards
- EVC must be separated from training and certification
- The EVC provider is responsible for the quality of the procedure and the certificate

2. Rights and information

- Importance of the written, complete and accessible information on the procedure, methods, necessary investment, time and requirements of the certifying bodies
- Signature of agreement with beneficiary
- Possibility of the concluding meeting for evaluating of the EVC process, availability of an appeal procedure
- Confidentiality of the information
- Written guarantees in case of the cease of activity of the EVC centre for finalizing the procedure and the quality of the outcomes

3. Analysis and assessment tools and criteria

- Clear evidence of acquired competences must be provided in the *Ervaringcertificaat*.
- Written process description with the distribution of tasks within EVC centre
- Validation is based on the existing standard, decided during the intake interview
- EVC takes into account all evidence provided by the candidate
- Experience is assessed based on the VRAAQ criteria (variety, relevance, actuality, authenticity and quantity)
- Assessment procedure fully cover the targeted standard
- The procedure is independent of the learning pathway (uses a mix of instruments)
- Transparency, reliability and independence are assured by written assessment procedures, forms, profiles of counsellors and interview
- Assessment procedure and copies of evidence are recorded for 3 years
- Precise description of the content of the *Ervaringcertificaat* (objective, applied standard, recognized competences and conclusion/indications in terms of recognition, pieces of evidence and relationship between the two)

4. Qualification of assessors and counsellors

- Independence and impartiality of the assessors – the clear separation of roles between supervisors/counsellors/facilitators and assessors
- Accompaniment, guidance and coaching process is essential
- Experience and knowledge of the profession, standard, EVC and assessment procedures are main criteria for recruitment and professional development of practitioners

5. Quality assurance

- Continuous evaluation of EVC process, quality of assessors and the certificate with stakeholders (via periodic questionnaires and other methods)
- Exploitation of the evaluation results
- Systematic registering the number of issued certificates

TABLE 7: DUTCH QUALITY CODE FOR EVC

Portugal

General context of RVC

A comparatively lower level of qualification in the population (72% of labour force without upper secondary education) and high school drop-out rate (38,6%) was the main driver for the development of the RVC system in Portugal (*Reconhecimento, Validação e Certificação de Competências* - RVCC). The legislative framework has since several years focused on the development and widening of access to lifelong learning, specifically with regards to people with lower level of qualification. For this purpose, the state created Recognition, Validation and Certification Centres in 2001.

In 2005, these centres were restructured in the New Opportunities Programme (*Programa Novas Oportunidades*) that was launched by the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity and the Ministry of Education, with the aim to bridge the gap between education, training and employment. The New opportunities centres network was established at secondary schools, vocational schools and training centres, municipalities or private companies and had two main functions:

- Guidance and counselling
- Recognition and validation of competences

From the institutional point of view, the RVC implementation is coordinated and supported by the Unit for the Development, Recognition and Validation of Competences, UDRVC (*Unidade de Desenvolvimento, Reconhecimento e Validação de Competências*), that was created by the *Instituto Politécnico de Setúbal* (IPS) in 2007.

In 2010 there were 453 NOCs. They rely on a computer-based system “Integrated System of Information and Management of Education and Training Offer” (*Sistema Integrado de Informação e Gestão da Oferta Formativa, SIGO*). This system gives updated information on the education and training offer and the validation processes at a national level.

The network impact has been evaluated and the whole system was adjusted in 2013. A new network of Centres for Qualification and Vocational Education (*Centros para a Qualificação e o Ensino Profissional, CQEP*) and the revised system focuses more on job market requirements and professional retraining. The CQEPs provide quality guidance and counselling about schools, VET and dual certification opportunities. These centres help youth and adults find education and training; develop processes for recognition, validation and certification of competencies.

The RVCC process is based on the two-level Key Skills Standards (comprises key skills such as Language and Communications, Mathematics, ICT, Citizenship etc.) and Vocational standards (National Qualification System was created in 2007 in Portugal) and the assessment methodology that is heavily focused on a dossier/portfolio, with the use of the *bilan de compétences*-derived methodology. 115 qualifications that are attainable through RVC process are collected in the National Catalogue of Qualifications. Educational institutions are

The RVC process in Portugal contains the following phases:

Reception and information	Candidates are informed about the goals, requirements, conditions and different phases of the RVC process.
Diagnosis	Analysis of the profile of the candidate and his career path of the candidate.
Orientation/	Candidate is guided towards the appropriate solution. After this stage the candidate can decide whether he wants to engage in RVC process or other measures (training or others...).

Guidance	
Recognition	This phase consists of the development of the personal portfolio, that allows the candidate in his self-assessment and reflection process and gather evidence of developed knowledge, skills and competences. A methodology of <i>bilan de compétences</i> is used. Optional workshops are available for candidates to support them in the creation of their portfolio.
Assessment/ Validation	The candidates makes a formal claim and submits his portfolio and supporting proofs to UDRVC. A jury nominated by the school examines the dossier/portfolio, conducts assessment interview or complementary assessment methods if needed (demonstration, oral or written tests...).
Certification	Jury and the scientific board of the school decides about the awarding of a full or partial validation. Full validation leads to a diploma that is equivalent to formal education. In the case of partial validation, a Competences Certificate is awarded the candidate is given recommendation about an Individual Learning Plan

TABLE 8: VALIDATION PROCESS IN PORTUGAL

In terms of impact, more than 1 million adults were enrolled in New Opportunities Centres since 2005, of which more than 400 000 acquired some qualification during the process. The external assessment of the New Opportunities programme showed following impact, that goes beyond RVC:

- Improvements in Key competences (literacy and e-skills (computer and Internet use)
- Enhancement of self-esteem and motivation to lifelong learning
- Improvement in soft skills
- Creation of local networks for qualifications development
- Increase participation of enterprises in the national qualification strategy

The impact study also identified some challenges:

- Assure the articulation between RVCC processes and flexible training paths
- Rationalize the RVC process for recognition and validation of school and professional competencies
- Strengthen outreach and motivate low skilled adults towards a qualification path
- Improve social recognition of certificates and diplomas awarded at the end of the RVC process
- Assure a sustainable funding mechanisms (co-financing scheme, resizing of the network...)

Quality assurance

The Charter for Quality Assurance for New Opportunities Centres was created in 2007 by National Agency of Qualifications (ANQ) and specifies the mission, the guiding principles, the requirements for work and the stages and dimensions of the process. A Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is a common methodology used for the self-assessment of the Centres and an annual report with development plan is made by every centre, which is the condition of the continuous public financing of the centre.

1. **Mission:** Give all adults an opportunity to access to a qualification and promote informal learning
2. **Guiding principles:** openness and flexibility, confidentiality, results orientation, accuracy and efficiency, responsibility and autonomy
3. **Requirements for work**
 - Qualified staff (director, a pedagogical coordinator, 3-5 RVCC counsellors, 5-8 trainers/teachers, 1-2 guidance staff, 1-2 administrative staff) - no specific RVCC qualification, but professionals must have a degree in an area of Social Science. Continuous development is assured through monthly meetings. No formal requirements for members of Juries, but must be a locally relevant stakeholder/teacher accredited by the ANQ)
 - Adequate facilities and time for the candidate (minimum 2 rooms for individual and 1 for group activities)
 - Periodic evaluation of processes, results and impacts
 - Availability of the complaints book
 - Integration in networks of local partnerships
4. **Stages / dimensions of the process**
 - Reception of adults
 - Availability of the information and documentation to possible beneficiaries
 - Assuring a personalized first contact, giving a date for next meeting
 - Diagnosis
 - Elaboration of a comprehensive profile during at least two sessions
 - Clarification of needs, interests and expectations
 - Minimizing the time for the referral to appropriate services (maximum 1 month)
 - Orientation/guidance
 - Possibility of free informed choice (minimum 2 sessions) between alternative pathways (RVCC or training, at least one outside of NOC)
 - Recognition of skills
 - *Bilan de compétences* i used, with a clear information about the process at the beginning
 - Clear identification and communication of the frame of reference (Key Skills and Vocational Standards)
 - Mobilization of a set of instruments selected on the basis of the individual case
 - Potfolio fosters self-reflection and allows for the appropriation of the process
 - Maximum 50h of complementary training can be used to develop missing skills
 - Validation of skills
 - Confrontation of the portfolio with the standards and identification of the skills to be certified
 - Certification of skills
 - Jury is appointed by the director of NOC and is composed of RVC professional, trainers and external evaluators
 - The jury has time for preparatory work (analysis of the portfolio with the RVC counsellor)
 - Clear distinction of roles between RVC team and external evaluator
 - Results are clearly explained to the candidate
 - Monitoring the personal development plan
 - The NOC gives the candidate a clear project and action plan for the continuation of his professional development pathway

TABLE 9: QUALITY CHART FOR NEW OPPORTUNITIES CENTRES, PORTUGAL (2007)

3. Conclusion

Different discussions between partners lead to the common understanding of different terms that are used for the different phases of the RVC process. The approximate equivalences between the three involved countries are described in the following table:

	Portugal	France	Netherland
INFORMATION	Reception Welcoming	<i>(bilan de compétences)</i> Information	<i>Get clients</i> Information
IDENTIFICATION/ GUIDANCE	Diagnosis Information Orientation/Guidance	Counselling	Intake
DOCUMENTATION	Recognition (portfolio)	Accompaniment / collecting (dossier)	Recognition (portfolio)
ASSESSMENT	Validation Certification	<i>(Simulation)</i> Jury	Validation/Assessment EVC report
CERTIFICATION	Diploma / individual learning plan	Diploma / partial validation	(not formally part of the EVC process)

TABLE 10: VOCABULARY USED IN PARTNER COUNTRIES FOR DIFFERENT STAGES OF THE RVC PROCESS

Based on these different evaluations, we propose the following overview of the existing quality criteria/areas that are used in the concerned countries. This is only a short summary, but most of the listed criteria/areas are present in different QA frameworks in the three examined countries:

EXISTING QUALITY CRITERIA / AREAS	
INFORMATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assuring written information, active outreach - Definition of a maximum acceptable delay between the demand and meeting - Clarity of the information and transparency of the process from the first moment - Guaranteeing confidentiality, equal access
IDENTIFICATION / GUIDANCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assigning respectable delays - Assignment of a personal counsellor - Assuring a voluntary participation - Signature of a written agreement - Availability of alternative pathways – possibility of a choice
DOCUMENTATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clear definition of the targeted certification - Accompaniment should allow a reflective, pedagogical and empowering analysis of experience - Assistance to the beneficiary is provided in the description of his skills - Clear definitions of respective roles - Possibility to individualize the support in terms of the form or duration
ASSESSMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assuring validity, reliability and fairness of the assessment methods - Assessment methods relevant to the work environment (simulation) - Strict adherence to a set of clear criteria, standards, referential - Availability of a preparation time for the study of the dossier by the jury - Clear separation of the roles of the accompanying and assessing staff - Jury composed of teachers and professionals of the relevant field - Exclusion of actors that intervene in previous phases - Assessment of variety, relevance, actuality, authenticity and quantity (VRAAQ) - Availability of an appeal procedure
CERTIFICATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Based on an established standard registered in a national repository - Partial validation is accompanied by a professional project with, clear action plan and a follow-up of the beneficiary
TRASVERSAL CRITERIA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adherence to the professional standards/requirements of the intervening staff - Regular exchange of practices between counsellors - Continuous professionalization of the counsellors - Respect of ethical imperatives - Adequate material and human resources - Availability of the documentation - Cooperation and sharing of experiences between intervening staff - Integration in partners network
QUALITY ASSURANCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Existence of internal or external audit - Qualitative and quantitative monitoring of outcomes and feedback - Exploitation of the evaluation results - Involvement of stakeholders in validation - Separation of RVC from training

TABLE 11: SYNTHESIS OF THE EXISTING QUALITY CRITERIA / AREAS IN THE EXAMINED COUNTRIES

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