



# Country report

# Belgium-Flanders

2016 update to the European inventory  
on validation of non-formal and informal learning

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# 1 Introduction and evaluation

## 1.1 Abstract

In the Flemish-speaking community of Belgium (hereafter Flanders), validation systems are available in the sectors of education and training, in the field of work, sports, youth and socio-cultural work. For many years, these different fields have developed their validation approach rather independently. This makes the validation perspective in Flanders rather diffuse and prevents it from being transparent.

The validation procedures and systems in Flanders have not changed substantially in recent years. Efforts have been mainly undertaken to make the system less complex or to align the development of validation procedures with overarching developments, such as the development of the NQF, but no significant changes have been made. Despite the efforts already made, the use of validation procedures is in decline. More efforts need to be invested to raise awareness of existing opportunities for validation for the public (jobseekers, employed persons, employers, intermediary organisations, etc.). Complementary to awareness raising actions, the value of the outcomes of validation needs to increase in order to motivate people to have their non-formal and informal learning validated. At societal level, the impact of validation is still very limited.

Some significant change is expected in the coming years, as the different policy departments are currently collaborating to develop a new, integrated policy framework for the recognition of competences. The NQF is the general framework for such new developments. The concept note for an integrated policy on validation has been approved by the Flemish Government in July 2015.

## 1.2 Main changes since the 2014 update

In Flanders, validation is possible in institutions for higher education and adult education, in the field of work, socio-cultural sector, youth sector and sports sector. Since 2011, the Department of Education and Training as well as the Department of Work and Social Economy and the Department of Culture, Youth, Media and Sports have been discussing the development of an integrated approach towards validation.

The main driver of this development was the fragmentation of existing validation practices including the acceptance by other institutions, terminologies, quality assurance mechanisms, legal bases and funding schemes for validation, among others. This fragmentation is seen as the main cause for the small number of users of validation procedures and the small-sized effect of validation outcomes. The new, integrated approach would make it possible to align the Flemish validation systems to the Council Recommendation on the Validation of non-formal and informal learning of December 2012 and to implement the European guidelines on validation. It would also contribute to reaching the policy aims of each policy domain concerned by validation.

The sectors of Education and Training and of Work and Social Economy are taking the lead towards an integrated approach on validation. Some new initiatives have already been adopted: a website bringing together all validation-related information has been developed and a task force has been formed to prepare the new decree on validation. However, the validation procedures and systems in Flanders have not changed substantially in recent years.

If consensus can be found and a new decree is accepted, one of the major changes to be expected is that the NQF will be the main reference for the new, integrated validation framework, as well as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, in order to make the validation system more transparent for individuals, providers, employers and intermediary organisations, not only in Flanders but also in other European countries.

## 2 National perspective

### 2.1 Overarching approach to validation

The issue of validation of non-formal and informal learning has been well-established for more than a decade on the public policy agenda in Belgium, where initiatives had been developed in the context of a wider drive to improve access to Lifelong Learning. Formal legal frameworks for validation have been put in place in both the French and Flemish speaking parts of the country.

In Flanders, the term 'EVC' (*Erkennen Van Competenties - recognition of competences*) is used to refer to the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Each Ministry Department regulates validation within its own sector. More specifically, these are the Departments for Work and Social Economy, Education and Training and Culture, Youth, Media and Sports. In all these departments, the development of validation systems and procedures contribute to the policy aims of enhancing the qualification levels of the population, reducing unemployment levels and facilitating lifelong learning, among others. Validation policy is aimed at the general population, but there are specific measures and initiatives that are targeted at low-skilled persons, unemployed people, migrants and refugees.

The practices around validation in the different sectors have not changed substantially since 2014<sup>1</sup>. Validation can be used to get admission to an education and training programme, to request exemptions from (parts of) the study programme and to obtain a work experience certificate. Validation is a matter of policy in different sectors and the arrangements in these sectors differ.

However, driven by the need to address the existing fragmentation with regard to validation practices and terminology, new developments are currently taking place at policy level aiming at an integrated approach towards validation. The main change concerns an increased cooperation between the sectors of education such as work, culture, youth and sports and the willingness to create a single framework linking the validation processes to the Flemish Qualifications Structure (VKS/NQF).

One of the first steps in the development of an integrated policy was the approval of the NQF in 2009, describing eight qualification levels and its subsequent implementation. The qualifications can be obtained through formal, informal or non-formal learning. It aims at clarifying qualifications and the way they are related to each other as well as at improving the communication about qualifications. All recognised qualifications are systematically being classified in the NQF (AKOV, 2012)<sup>2</sup>. This NQF recently became the reference for validation procedures. This will raise the visibility and civil effect of the qualification certificates, acquired through validation.

Furthermore, all information regarding validation has been made available to the public via a dedicated website ([www.erkennenvancompetenties.be](http://www.erkennenvancompetenties.be)).

In July 2015, the concept for such an integrated validation framework for validation in Flanders was approved by the Flemish government (Vlaamse overheid, 2015). According to this, a government Task Force has been set up to develop the integrated policy framework and to draft a decree on validation.

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<sup>1</sup> As described in: Eliza Kritikos, '2014 update to the European Inventory on Validation of non-formal and informal learning. Country Report Belgium (Flanders). European Commission, DG Education and Culture and Cedefop.

<sup>2</sup> [http://vlaamsekwalficatiestructuur.be/wat-is-vks/meer-info-en-downloads/files/Brochure-Developed-Approved-Implemented-\(En\)-12-2012.pdf](http://vlaamsekwalficatiestructuur.be/wat-is-vks/meer-info-en-downloads/files/Brochure-Developed-Approved-Implemented-(En)-12-2012.pdf)

## 2.2 Validation in education and training

Currently, in Flanders there are several validation strategies in education and training, according to the educational level. None of these strategies was introduced recently. In the education system, validation strategies have been mainly developed in the higher education and the adult education sectors.

### Secondary education

Those who wish to obtain the diploma or certificate of secondary education at a later stage can take an exam at the Exam Committee<sup>3</sup>. This is possible for a selection of educational programmes offered in secondary education<sup>4</sup>. Exams are organised all year around.

### Higher Education

Validation of prior learning in higher education is defined by the Codex Higher Education (11 October 2013). The process of recognising non-formal and informal learning has been in place in universities and university colleges since September 2005.

This system is decentralised with each association<sup>5</sup> in higher education elaborating their own rules of procedure. The procedures result in a proof of acquired competences (or in Dutch 'bewijs van bekwaamheid') which can then lead to the appropriate exemptions/shortened study duration and credit certificates and/or a proof of qualification. Validation in this sector can be used to pursue education or for professional aims. For the latter however, the institutions cannot guarantee the acceptance by other higher educational institutions nor by employers of the proof of competences.

The procedure refers to the level descriptors included in article II.141 of the Codex on Higher Education (2013) and the learning outcomes laid down by the higher education institutions. The procedure starts often from a portfolio and typically includes other elements such as assessments, structured interviews and behavioural observation.

Standard admission requirements for higher education in Flanders include a diploma of secondary education. There is no standard entrance exam, except for medicine, dentistry and arts. For those who have not obtained a diploma of secondary education institutions can offer a special 'entrance examination' ('toelatingsonderzoek'). If granted, the person can access higher education without a formal secondary education diploma.

Even though the legislator had foreseen to bring this procedure under validation of competences, people representing higher education institutions argue that this should not be considered to be as such. The reason for this is that the outcome is not a proof of competences, like for example a diploma of secondary education, but rather a proof that an individual has the potential to succeed in obtaining a higher education programme degree even though he or she has not finished secondary education. At this moment, the different associations agree on common basic principles regarding the procedure for the entrance examination. All associations use the same standardised test as an important part of their procedure. Candidates can apply just once per academic year. The procedure is free of charge. Since the 2015-2016 academic year, passing the entrance examination gives access to all higher education institutions.

### Adult education

In the Flemish Decree of 15 June 2007 relating to (formal) adult education, exemptions linked to the modular organisation of educational programmes are defined. All programmes

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/secundair/examencommissie>. Exceptionally, this system can also be used by (highly gifted) pupils to obtain a diploma quicker than foreseen.

<sup>4</sup> I.e. General, Technical, Art and Vocational secondary education (ASO, TSO, KSO, BSO).

<sup>5</sup> An **association** is an official entity regulating the cooperation of a **university** and one or more **university colleges**.

(i.e. modules) in the centres for adult education are developed based on course profiles approved by the Flemish Government. This implies that all (modular) certificates are mutually interchangeable. The centres for adult education provide an evaluation for each module. Each centre has a code of conduct that defines the procedures for exemption and disputes of evaluation. Exemptions can be granted on the basis of credits for prior learning and/or evaluation of competences.

## 2.3 Validation and the labour market

The arrangements set up by the Department of Work essentially aim at the recognition of non-formal and informal learning through the 'Certificate of Work Experience' ('Ervaringsbewijs') created by a decree approved on 30 April 2004. In short, people can receive a certificate of work experience if they demonstrate that they have acquired the skills needed to perform an occupation. The social partners give their advice on the variety of professions for which a certificate of work experience is relevant (and needs to be included). It is based on the competences related to a certain profession, no matter where one has achieved those competences. Therefore, professional competence profiles are translated into standards by the SERV (Flanders' Social and Economic Committee) and the social partners. These standards are used in a test situation to assess whether people dispose of the required competences. If they pass the test, they receive a certificate for work experience, granted by the Flemish government. The organisations assessing applicants are recognised centrally by the Minister of Work after they have fulfilled the procedure for accreditation by responding to a call for proposals by the European Social Fund Agency.

Although the certificate of work experience is granted by the government, it is in general, at this stage, not equivalent to a diploma, although there are some exceptions (e.g. out-of-school care for children). Due to its close link to the labour market, it is the employers who can support the value of these certificates. Some collective labour agreements (e.g. health care) state that having a certificate of work experience give access to better job classifications or enhanced functions.

While awaiting the new decree on validation (validation based on the NQF), the certificate of work experience services will be continued. However, no new certificates for work experience will be developed. Instead, efforts are invested to make the existing certificates correspond to the professional qualifications that are already available.

In addition to this procedure of recognising informal and non-formal learning, much attention has been given towards the implementation of a platform for competence-based matching (an interface which virtually connects individuals and their competences with prospective employers and training opportunities, which is further explained in more detail in the section on Skills Audits below).

### 2.3.1 Skills audits

A sound definition of 'skills audit' has not been developed as such in Flanders and generally the EU definition of skills audit is adopted.

The Department of Work and Social Economy jointly with the VDAB<sup>6</sup> are increasingly focused on 'making competences visible'. This focus has to be understood within the wider current climate of the 'bottlenecks economy' and getting the best possible match between available and requested competences.

In 2013, VDAB has implemented an operational platform for competence based matching which uses common tools and languages to match the competences of an individual to those required by employers. It is based on Competent, an online competence management

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<sup>6</sup> Public employment service of Flanders.

system managed by the SERV consisting of occupational profiles validated by social partners and stakeholders. These services would allow individuals to move more smoothly between jobs and sectors, thereby reducing current skills bottlenecks. After all, it would help all citizens to obtain labour market relevant skills, to make their skills visible, or to re-skill to meet the needs of changing labour market demands. This matching system is considered to be innovative and good practice within Europe<sup>7</sup>.

Part of the competence based matching platform is the e-tool “My Career” (Mijn Loopbaan) which facilitates the identification and documentation of competences. Each individual using the tool can collect their own personal information on acquired competences. All official degrees and certificates obtained are automatically added to the tool.

## 2.4 Validation and the third sector

The cultural, youth and sports sector are ideal places for giving attention to the recognition of competences. On the one hand, there is volunteering in which young people and adults develop a variety of competences and, on the other hand, there are numerous courses in which participants work on developing their competences. Both young people and adults want, for a diversity of reasons and within different environments, to make their competences visible. Within these sectors therefore, several instruments have been developed over the past years to make this possible.

Overall though, certificates issued to participants in these types of learning or training activities are in general known as “certificates of participation”, which are mainly based on self-assessment practices rather than on institutional or formal assessments, except for the – formal – procedures and diplomas within the Flemish School for sports coaches (in Dutch: Vlaamse trainerschool (VTS)). In the cultural and youth sectors the focus is for the moment only on validation in the sense of ‘identification’ and ‘documentation’ and less so on ‘assessment’ and ‘certification’. Several instruments exist in these sectors to ‘make competences visible’ which are explained in more detail below.

### The socio-cultural and youth sector

In Flanders, Socius, the support service for social and cultural adult education, is an autonomous body with the objective of strengthening the social and cultural sector. One of its stated aims is to ensure that social and cultural organisations play an important role in lifelong learning. In 2008, the Support Centre for Youth together with Socius developed the tool Oscar which was, after an initial testing phase, presented to the public in November 2009.

Oscar can be used as a portfolio to bring together experience from informal and non-formal learning environments. They are integrated into the portfolio with the denominator ‘competence documents’. In this regard, a learning certificate is a competence document with no assessment of the obtained competences. Validation is not a vital part of the tool, nor does it need to be linked with formal professional qualifications. However, since 2015, the use of the tool is not supported anymore and no investment in further developments have yet been made.

Youth work is an area where non-formal and informal learning often takes place and where this type of learning could lead to a qualification on the NQF. Given the sector’s concerns that a higher degree of formalisation could undermine the voluntary nature of activity, there is no strong support in the youth sector in developing formal qualifications for voluntary youth workers. However, since October 2015<sup>8</sup>, there is a specific legal agreement with regard to the attestation of training courses for youth workers, delivered by the Department of Culture,

<sup>7</sup> Magazine of the Support Centre of Work and Social Economy ‘Over werk’, ‘Competence orientated matching’, Acco Publishing, 1/2011.

<sup>8</sup> Adaptation of the Decree of January 20<sup>th</sup> 2012 on youth and children’s rights policy.

Youth, Sports and Media (Youth). The validation of competences acquired through courses including apprenticeships, based on competence profiles, leads to the award of certificates<sup>9</sup>. This new system is due to be evaluated by the end of 2018.

### **Sports and the Flemish School for sports coaches**

Sport Vlaanderen (formerly known as Bloso)<sup>10</sup> is the sport agency of the Flemish government and has been part of the policy domain Culture, Youth, Media and Sports since 2006. The Flemish School for sports coaches (VTS) is the institution coordinating the cooperation between Sport Vlaanderen, the Flemish universities and higher education colleges providing an education and training programme in physical education and the Flemish Sports Federation. This institution created a validation guide in March 2012 that describes the procedure that applicants have to go through for validation of prior learning. This validation guide was updated in 2015. There is however no legal base for validation in the sports sector. The current validation procedure was developed in 2009 to respond to the demand for exemptions. Applicants who have successfully gone through the validation procedure can obtain either an exemption for a course or training programme or a full exemption which means that a proof of competences equal to a VTS qualification is awarded.

Currently, it is emphasised by the VTS that the level of competences required to obtain a diploma is similar between the different sports sectors.

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.sociaalcultureel.be/jeugd/regelgeving\\_KV/131213\\_kadervormingstrajecten-memorie-2deprincip.pdf](http://www.sociaalcultureel.be/jeugd/regelgeving_KV/131213_kadervormingstrajecten-memorie-2deprincip.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Agency for the Improvement of Physical Development, Sport and Open Air Recreation.



### 3 Links to national qualification systems

The process of referencing the NQF with the European one was completed in 2011 (AKOV, 2011). The NQF outlines what kind of training, experiences and roles can lead to a qualification. It aims to create a reference framework that allows education and training providers and the labour market to communicate about qualifications in the Flemish community and in Europe. The NQF distinguishes between 'professional qualifications' and 'educational qualifications', a distinction which the EQF does not make. A professional qualification gives an overview of the competences with which a profession can be exercised. A professional qualification can be obtained through education, training or the certification of one's practical experience. It is 'a complete and classified set of competences with which a profession can be exercised'. An educational qualification is 'a complete and classified set of competences with which further studies in secondary or higher education can be undertaken or professional activities can be performed'. Educational qualifications are exclusively issued by educational institutions. Depending on the educational level and the form of education, educational qualifications may consist of one or more professional qualifications, final objectives and/or specific final objectives<sup>11</sup>.

The Flemish Higher Education sector has been using the ECTS for over ten years and no significant changes have taken place in this area since 2010 except for a stronger focus on searching for possibilities in which validation can be better linked to pathways of lifelong learning.

The system for credit accumulation starts from learning outcomes. Credits in higher education give an indication of the effort or amount of work (workload) that a student has to deliver to acquire learning results. The workload is the time that the student has taken to execute all learning activities such as attending courses and seminars, completing practice and projects, self-studying and exams that are necessary to acquire and demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes. The workload of one academic year is set at 60 ECTS credits<sup>12</sup>. 60 credits correspond with 1 500 to 1 800 hours of workload. Learning outcomes that have been acquired previously can after a successful assessment or validation of the learning outcomes lead to an acquisition of the corresponding credits. Credits are referred to in Flanders as "study points", while students who successfully complete a course or modules are awarded a credit certificate.

No credit systems have been developed for compulsory education in Flanders and currently, no intentions are identified that would lead to such a system in the near future (AKOV, 2011).

Flanders is closely following the European evolutions with regard to ECVET<sup>13</sup>, but has not undertaken formal initiatives to implement the system. A consultation amongst Flemish stakeholders (advisory and consultative bodies such as VLOR and SERV, training providers, representatives of the profit sector, representatives of the social profit sector and NVAO) regarding ECVET in 2007 showed that most of the consulted organisations found that the

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<sup>11</sup> [http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/kwalificatiestructuur/links-en-publicaties/bijlagen/Brochure-Developed\\_Approved\\_Implemented-\(En\)-12-2012.pdf](http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/kwalificatiestructuur/links-en-publicaties/bijlagen/Brochure-Developed_Approved_Implemented-(En)-12-2012.pdf) (p. 7)

<sup>12</sup> The number of hours per credit is 25 to 30. Source: Flemish Report on Implementation of the Bologna process 2012.

<sup>13</sup> This system is also based on learning outcomes and allows the validation of the results of non-formal and informal learning

system had potential, but remained much too vague and unclear and needed further development (AKOV, 2011).

## 4 Standards

The standards used in Flanders are occupational standards. The development of standards is supervised by the Agency under the Ministry of Education, AHOVOKS, and involves sectoral representatives of employers and employees, the PES (VDAB), Syntra Vlaanderen, independent experts and education and training providers. All standards also indicate the best methods for assessment. The procedure for development of standards is currently being re-designed.

Due to the current reform, priority is given to strengthening the coherence of the validation systems and not to the expansion of validation systems. Currently, no new certificates for work experience are being developed, but efforts are invested to make the existing certificates correspond to the professional qualifications that are already available.

## 5 Organisations and institutions involved in validation arrangements and its coordination

### **The Department of Education and Training**

In this policy sector the approach towards validation is decentralised and the education and training institutions are given a lot of responsibility. Validation practices in this sector develop rather bottom-up depending on the motivation of those concerned and the amount of demand. However, incentives are also provided centrally (for example support and the availability of assessor training at association level).

Overall, the Ministry of Education and Training is responsible for the broad design of and approach towards validation by drafting the legislation on the different sectors within the education field. The actual implementation on the ground is done jointly by the Department of Education and Training and the associations and education institutions for Higher Education and by the Department for Education and Training and institutions for adult education.

In terms of providing general information, this role is implemented by the Ministry of Education and Training whereas in the case of both adult education and higher education it is the institutions themselves which provide specific information and raise awareness. Also with regard to providing counselling and guidance; undertaking assessments; certifying the outputs of the validation procedures and quality assurance both for higher and adult education, it is the associations, educational institutions and adult educational institutions which provide this service.

Evaluation and review are carried out yearly by the associations and educational institutions themselves and every five years by the Ministry of Education and Training for higher education whereas the Inspectorate does this for adult education.

### **The Department for Work and Social Economy**

The Department for Work and Social Economy is responsible for the validation procedures in the field of the labour market, taking into account the developments regarding the NQF and the new framework for validation that is currently under construction.

As described in the EU Inventory 2010 and 2014 reports, the previous procedure was developed to manage the different aspects of validation, in particular for the certificate for vocational experience, in which different stakeholders are involved. Currently, no new certificates are being developed awaiting the new decree.

For the moment, information and promotion as well as awareness-raising activities are undertaken in partnership by the Department for Work and Social Economy, VDAB, and the (sectoral) social partners. A new decree will probably also involve other stakeholders.

The assessment is undertaken by the assessment centres. In order to guarantee the quality of the assessment, as well as transparency and objectivity, only assessment centres accredited by the government can award certificates.<sup>14</sup>

The certification authority belongs to the Ministry of Work and Social Economy.

### **The Department of Culture, Youth, Media and Sports**

#### *Youth Sector*

The Department of Culture, Youth, Media and Sports is responsible for legislating on the validation of competences in relation to youth work. Organisations providing training courses are responsible for the implementation of the validation of competences in the field of youth work.

#### *Sports sector*

In the domain of Sports, and more specifically the validation of non-formal and informal learning done by the VTS, the division of tasks is as follows. The design of the procedure and approach is developed within the administration of Sport Vlaanderen and formally accepted by the government. Information, promotion and awareness raising takes place via the VTS and mostly via their website<sup>15</sup>. The role of guidance is shared between different stakeholders depending also on the specific sector within Sports; a person from the Sport Vlaanderen administration will be involved, together with partners within the Flemish sports federation as well as the applicant since they have to put the dossier together. Undertaking the assessment as well as the certification of the outcomes of the validation procedure is done by the VTS. Similar to the role of guidance, partners from a specific sector within sports will be included in the assessment phase depending on which fields need to be validated.

There is no external quality assurance on the validation procedure undertaken by the VTS. Quality assurance is ensured by the broad range of partners included within the partnership and the composition of the validation commission within the VTS. The validation procedure was evaluated for the first time in 2015. Based on the experience within VTS, feedback from partners who took part in the jury, feedback from candidates and remarks from the sports federations, the procedure was updated. The purpose of these adjustments was to clarify the procedure and the evidence to be handed over. Moreover, the administrative burden for the applicant was reduced and the support provided was improved.

### **Education and training providers**

#### *Higher education institutions*

In the higher education sector, five associations are responsible for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Each 'association' (cooperation platform between universities and university colleges) is legally authorised to act as an agency for validation. These associations are:

- KU Leuven Association (Associatie KU Leuven).
- Ghent University Association (Associatie Universiteit Gent);
- Antwerp University Association (Associatie Universiteit en Hogescholen Antwerpen);
- Brussels University Association (Universitaire Associatie Brussel); and
- Limburg University Association (Associatie Universiteit-Hogescholen Limburg).

<sup>14</sup> Departement Werk en Sociale Economie in samenwerking met het Subsidieagentschap Werk en Sociale Economie en het ESF-agentschap, 'Jaarrapport ervaringsbewijs. 1 januari 2012 – 31 December 2012'.

<sup>15</sup> I.e. [www.sportvlaanderen/vts](http://www.sportvlaanderen/vts)

### ***Private sector actors (including social partners)***

Regarding the position adopted by employers' organisations and trade unions, they agree globally on the principle of validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Most of them underline the positive dimensions of this process as well as the opportunity that is therefore given to recognise the formative dimension of work. They recognise that the process can be useful when it comes to identifying cross-cutting competences as in the case of mobility or reconversion. To date, it can be considered that social partners are increasingly involved in the process. All the sectoral social partners sign an agreement with the Flemish government on topics related to education, training and labour market ('sector covenant'). Almost all the sectoral social partners are, in some ways, involved in promoting work experience certificates in their sector. They are also involved in the development of the NQF.

### ***Assessment centres for the work experience certificate***

All public and private training providers can apply for accreditation with regard to the work experience certificate at an assessment centre. To guarantee fair treatment of individuals and transparent assessment, the assessment centres recognised for the work experience certificate must comply with nationally-determined assessment standards and assessment directives (these rules are defined in the decision of the Flemish Government in implementing the Decree of 30/4/2004).

### ***Third sector organisations***

#### *Sports sector*

The validation provider in the area of trainers in sport is the VTS where the role has been explained in more detail above. Validation in other areas of sport, for example obtaining exemption for the higher education programmes of Physical Education is being undertaken by the Associations for Higher Education.

#### *Socio-cultural and Youth sector*

No significant changes have taken place since 2010 with regard to providers in the socio-cultural sector in Flanders. The sub-sectors work together despite diverging and sometimes conflicting policies and practices.

As emphasised by Socius: *'the actors involved in socio-cultural adult education prefer to develop their own instruments and procedures to recognise the acquired skills. This freedom is seen as crucial. Stakeholders from socio-cultural education fear that the emphasis is placed on the acquisition of diplomas, rather than the acquisition of skills and competences'*.

The youth sector has been working on implementing competence based practices in the field, guided by legislation on attestation introduced in 2015.

## **6 Information, advice and guidance**

### **6.1 Awareness-raising and recruitment**

So far, little information and promotional activities have been implemented in Flanders regarding validation. Awareness-raising activities are undertaken independently by the respective governmental departments and/or by validation actors. However, in time a large, coordinated awareness-raising campaign will be needed to inform the public about validation. In the meantime, a new website is available for consultation ([www.erkennenvancompetenties.be](http://www.erkennenvancompetenties.be)). In addition, intermediate organisations which are closely related to the target groups could function as information centres.

## 6.2 Information, advice and guidance

The website, [www.erkennenvancompetenties.be](http://www.erkennenvancompetenties.be), informs the wider public on the different opportunities for validation. In addition, all providers of validation procedures inform their target groups through their own communication channels.

In the higher education sector, validation is part of the information and orientation process that is carried out by each education and training institution. It is also mentioned on the website of each association.

Furthermore, potential beneficiaries of the exam commission are required to participate in information sessions before taking part<sup>16</sup>.

Information and promotion as well as awareness-raising activities for the work experience certificate are undertaken by the Department for Work and Social Economy. The Flemish public employment service (VDAB) also provides each jobseeker/citizen, who claims to have work experience in a certain occupation, specific information on how to obtain a work experience certificate<sup>17</sup>. Employers and their employees are also informed.

Furthermore, the social partners have an important role in awareness raising.

Most providers of validation procedures do not charge for giving general information or intakes, but a maximum fee of EUR 100 can be requested by candidates for assistance, such as with preparing a portfolio.

## 6.3 Measures to enhance the awareness of validation initiatives and practices amongst guidance practitioners

The general information website contains information on validation initiatives and practices. This website can be consulted by all interested parties. There are no specific measures to enhance awareness specifically on validation initiatives and practices amongst guidance practitioners. All guidance practitioners, including unions and career counsellors are informed about the work experience certificate.

# 7 Validation practitioners

## 7.1 Profile of validation practitioners

No substantial changes have taken place since 2010 with regard to the profile of validation practitioners in Flanders

In higher education, in most cases, the assessment is carried out by a jury of at least two assessors, unless the procedure is completely standardised (e.g. a test with no open-ended questions). However, the organisation and appointment of juries/assessors varies depending on the Association for Higher Education. Basic information is available on the associations' websites, including study guides and specific guides on validation edited by the institutions, and also on the website of the Flemish department of Education.

In relation to validation leading to the award of the work experience certificate, the law decree 30/4/2004 and decision Flemish government 23/09/2005) determines that validation assessors must be evaluation experts (i.e. they must have a minimum of one year's experience in assessment) and must be an expert in the occupation they are assessing). It is not possible to combine the assessment activity with the actual guidance and support of the applicant.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/secundair/examencommissie/index.htm>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.vdab.be/opleidingen/ervaringsbewijs>

## 7.2 Qualification requirements

As explained in the 2014 EU Inventory report, in higher education there are no qualification requirements for validation practitioners determined by the government.

Professional qualifications of assessor and guidance counsellor have been developed, involving different stakeholders. The Flemish government will discuss the profiles in the near future and recognition of these profiles should follow.

The approved professional qualifications of assessor and guidance counsellor will be used as quality insurance instruments to improve the quality of validation. Possibly, these qualifications will be used as a reference for developing training sessions for professionals in the field of assessment and guidance. At the moment these qualifications are not required for people wanting to work as an assessor or guidance counsellor.

With regard to the validation practitioners of the VTS there is not one specific profile. The people working in the pedagogical division who follow up the validation dossiers all have a Master in Physical Education and a qualification in pedagogy and can demonstrate work experience in this domain.

## 7.3 Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

The Decree on *Higher Education* (2011) prescribes a five-year evaluation of validation-procedures in higher education institutions, which has been undertaken twice so far. The government has not yet determined which quality standards the associations should meet, and how they should be met. The associations organise by themselves in-house training and they provide in-house support to validation practitioners. Training is carried out annually both for assessors and for guidance practitioners. There is no external formal organisation or framework for professionalising validation practitioners in higher education.

The institutions for *adult education* in Flanders have their own individual validation procedures; the training of validation practitioners in these institutions has not yet been planned.

The legislation concerning the *certificate for vocational experience* obliges assessment centres to organise training for their employees who offer guidance and for their assessors. Each assessor receives a general one-week training followed by a profession specific training during three days on the use of the tools and procedures for validation. During the first year, the assessor is always supervised. Only after the first year, the assessor is allowed to work independently. Each year, all assessors gather at least once to discuss practice.

Since 2009, an expertise network for validation providers (around 200), including an official website on validation of competences ([www.erkennenvancompetenties.be](http://www.erkennenvancompetenties.be)) has been established. The initiative is directed by a 'team of validation promoters' and supported by AHOVOKS. The aim of this network and website is to support and enhance the quality of validation procedures and support new validation providers. The members of the network are experts in validation, working in different sectors: higher education, adult education, assessment centres for the certification of work experience, continuing vocational training, the cultural sector, and youth and sports sector.

# 8 Quality assurance

## 8.1 Quality assurance systems / procedures

### **General**

The main body in Flanders overseeing quality assurance for pathways leading to professional qualifications is AHOVOKS. AHOVOKS is responsible for the quality assurance of all education, training and validation systems that lead to recognised qualifications in the Flemish qualifications structure.

### **Education and training providers**

The quality assurance framework for *higher education* does not fall under AHOVOKS. As a consequence the associations in the higher education sector and the adult education centres differ in their procedures, standards and methodologies in place. Institutional practice in recognition of prior learning is not explicitly included in the quality assurance processes used to evaluate institutions and/or programmes in higher education<sup>18</sup>. Each association for higher education is responsible for quality assurance of validation procedures with respect to the following criteria: transparency, reliability and regularity of the procedures and methodology adopted.

AHOVOKS has made available a 'quality kit' to ensure quality in education. This kit can be used as a self-assessment instrument. Several quality aspects of competence measurement are covered.

For the *work experience certificate*, the quality assurance framework is regulated by the funding scheme. More specifically, important factors are content guidelines (script/test), the quality label (ESF or equivalent) and the ESF audit mechanisms. Furthermore, the assessment instrument is examined by an independent commission (validation commission) consisting of experts in validation and in the relevant field. It is also common practice that the assessor may not assess more than a predetermined number of candidates.

Given the more centralised approach with regard to work experience certificates, the assessment centres are subject to the same rules of procedure. Since 2010, with the aim of strengthening the quality provided by the assessment centres, it was decided to make it compulsory for all assessment centres which offer the option of obtaining a work experience certificate, to have a validated practice test ('praktijkproef').

This means furthermore that when a practice test has been set up by an assessment centre and has been validated, another assessment centre has to work with exactly the same practice test. The aim of this approach is to have a more efficient spending of resources, i.e. one-off use of resources with regard to the design and development of a practice test as well as a guarantee that the same assessment procedure is used, no matter to which assessment centre a candidate goes.

The Flemish ESF-agency has developed a validation procedure for this purpose based on the following criteria: reliability, validity and alignment with SERV standards.<sup>19</sup>

### **Sports sector**

Responsibility for the quality assurance of certificates in the *sports sector* lies with Sport Vlaanderen. This is considered as a given for the sports staff training courses organised by the VTS. As for the obligatory refresher courses, Sport Vlaanderen/VTS recognises only those courses organised by the VTS partners. Further training can also be recognised for specific target groups (such as lifeguards) that are organised by Instituut voor Sportbeheer en Recreatiebeleid (ISB) or the Vlaamse Reddingsfederatie.

With regard to the *socio-cultural sector*, no changes have taken place and the quality assurance system as described in the 2010 report still stands. Legally, the socio-cultural adult education organisations are required to work according to the principles of integral quality assurance. However, the government cannot guarantee the training certificates issued in the socio-cultural sector. It is left to the discretion of training providers as to whether they issue learning certificates or not. This applies to the accredited training providers, where there is a degree of control, as well as non-accredited training providers.

<sup>18</sup> Flemish Report on Implementation of the Bologna process 2012.

<sup>19</sup> AKOV, 'Referencing of the Flemish Qualifications Framework to the European Qualifications Framework, Report July 2011', Government of Flanders.

The strategy adopted on validation in socio-cultural education includes a number of recommendations in the context of issuing competence certificates. These include for example, “if an organisation issues competence certificates it must further be able to demonstrate that the procedures and instruments used score positively with regard to reliability and validity. Non-accredited or non-subsidised organisations must first undergo an audit procedure (conducted by an external agency) to show that they operate to a high quality standard”<sup>20</sup>.

With regard to youth work, there is a legal framework to be adopted with regard to attestation of youth work competences.

## 8.2 Evaluation framework

There is no overall evaluation framework; each sector has its own evaluation framework.

### **Higher education**

The Department of Education and Training undertakes every 5 years an evaluation of the performance of all *higher education institutions*, whereas this is done yearly by the associations themselves.

The Association KU Leuven commissioned an online survey of candidates and coordinators on the quality of the validation procedure (Peeters and Loyens), relating to accessibility, transparency, assessment, professionalism and quality assurance. The following conclusions have been made based on the survey results<sup>21</sup>:

- Overall, both coordinators and candidates (to a lesser extent) consider the accessibility to validation procedures to be positive.
- On two statements only, the minority of candidates responded positively. These are the portfolio guidance (48 %) and removing obstacles (39 %);
- Guidance in relation to the competences of the programme and guidance in putting together the portfolio are not assessed positively by the candidates. The guide for starting a validation procedure can still be improved.
- With regard to transparency, in general, candidates are positive about the conduct of the procedures, the way they are assessed and the clear timetable. However, only 40 % of coordinators and candidates agree with the statement that it is clear how the assessment commission comes to a decision;
- Candidates are relatively positive about the assessment which they believe looks reliable and valid;
- With regard to quality assurance, some of the coordinators comment upon this not being assured enough but this may be due to for example the low number of dossiers overall which makes a structural and systematic approach to quality assurance difficult. So there is at the moment a lack of evaluation of the procedure and all its aspects.

### **Work experience certificate**

The Department of Work and Social Economy issues a yearly report on the functioning of the *work experience certificate*.

### **Sports**

VTS is responsible for the evaluation of its own validation processes.

<sup>20</sup> Socius, 2006, quoted in Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning. OECD Thematic Review. Flanders (Belgium). Country Note and Country Background Report.

<sup>21</sup> The results are based on the opinion of 52 candidates and 10 coordinators. Answers ranging from totally agree to totally disagree.



## 9 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

### 9.1 Funding

Funding arrangements are very diverse. The difference between the funding arrangements for validation in higher education and validation in the work sector is described below.

At the moment, in the *higher education sector* it is the education and training institutions which have to bear the various costs of validation together with individuals who also bear some of the associated costs. So there is no funding available from the government for validation within the higher education sector. Thus stakeholders in this sector feel that on the one hand validation is promoted but that on the other hand it is not financially supported, which affects its acceptance at institutional level.

In the work sector, the certificates for work experience are funded in part by ESF (60 %) and in part by the Flemish Community (40 %). A yearly budget of EUR 800 000 is allocated to the assessment centres which issue work experience certificates. Sectoral tests are financed by the sectoral training funds.

It is not clear what the funding framework will be once the integrated validation policy has been implemented. This will be discussed at the end of 2016.

#### **Sports sector**

The VTS is funded by the government. No other funding schemes are available.

#### *Youth and sociocultural sector*

No specific funding schemes for validation procedures are available.

### 9.2 Distribution of costs

#### **Higher education**

The procedure for recognition of qualifications in higher education is free of charge. For competences acquired outside formal education, that is, through non-formal or informal learning, associations are responsible for recognition and assessment.

Before the initial assessment is conducted, an administrative fee of EUR 55 is charged.

The maximum cost for the assessment varies<sup>22</sup>:

- EUR 590 for a proficiency assessment at academic or professional bachelor level;
- EUR 770 for a proficiency assessment at master level if the individual has no bachelor degree;
- EUR 230 for a proficiency assessment at master level if the individual has a bachelor degree;
- EUR 55 administrative cost for a proficiency assessment for partial elements of study costs (depending on the number of competence assessments to be undertaken).

The associations calculate and charge different prices for a validation procedure, taking into account the complexity of the dossier. A simple test could cost EUR 50 while a complex test may be up to EUR 150. Combining several tests enhances the costs, although there is a rule that the total sum cannot be exceeded beyond a certain limit. An administrative cost of EUR 55 is added to each validation procedure.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Evaluatie van de EVC-, EVK- en vrijstellingsprocedures aan de associaties, hogescholen en universiteiten in de Vlaamse Gemeenschap. Departement Onderwijs en Vorming – Afdeling Hoger Onderwijs. Mei 2010, pp. 14-15.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem.

It was previously stated in the EU Inventory report of 2010 that most institutions had expressed a view that there would not be an immediate economic return in the process. This is still the case currently although to a lesser extent. For example in higher education granting exemptions to an applicant means that institutions lose money because the recognition process currently does not generate new incomes, requires heavy investments and additionally, exemptions might result in the payment of a lower admission fee. However, part of the latest developments in the higher education sector are focused on increasing the cost-benefit ratio both for the institutions as well as the candidates by looking at ways in which, instead of screening a full profile, focus is placed on clusters of competences, and by differentiating between simple and complex dossiers. However, this did not lead to more people benefiting from the validation procedures, as the number of applicants is still in decline. Apparently, the cost of the procedure for individuals is not the main barrier.

Overall in recent years, procedures and practices in higher education have improved and providers are now better at accommodating the validation procedure to the profile of candidates and thus making the process overall more efficient. Moreover, guidance practitioners in several departments are focused on the first steps, i.e. advising potential candidates and helping them estimate their chances of succeeding in the validation procedure. To this end, a 'quick scan' instrument is being used by some of the associations during the first phase. This helps the guidance practitioner, based on the CV and work experience, to determine if it is worth starting the procedure. This way of working is not part of the regulation. On the other hand, procedures have become more standardised; for example, instead of simply proving competences based on portfolios and during an interview, several tests also need to be passed in some cases. This could also discourage individuals from enrolling in the procedure.

Overall, it is agreed that if validation leads to a shortened education pathway then it is worth the investment; practice shows that this is easier to achieve for individuals who have a substantial amount of professional experience.

### **Adult education**

In the adult education sector, no fee is required for validation procedures.

### **Work experience certificate**

The yearly budget for work experience certificates is approximately EUR 800 000, which consists of 55 % co-financing and 45 % from the ESF financing. This budget is allocated integrally to the assessment centres which then provide the validation services to individuals for free (at most, a fee of EUR 100 might be asked to be paid in certain circumstances).

The assessment centres are given a one-off start-up reimbursement of EUR 15 000 and, in addition, the centres receive EUR 5 000 for each additional certificate that they complete. The accredited assessment centre receives a maximum reimbursement of EUR 150 per applicant to offer guidance on competences or advice during the process of completing the talent pass. Upon assessing the competences of the applicant according to the relevant articles of the Decree on work experience certificates<sup>24</sup>, a reimbursement of EUR 670 or EUR 1 045 is received depending on the certificate for which the applicant is undergoing the assessment.

As part of the government measure on 'training vouchers', an employee can request, on an annual basis, a training voucher up to the value of EUR 250 to which the government contributes to cover half of the value. These vouchers can also be used for the work experience certificate. Until now, all recognised assessment centres offer the service for free.

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<sup>24</sup> Art. 7(4), (5) and (6) added to BVR 2007-10-05/36

Another government measure is paid educational leave. It is the right of workers from the private sector to follow recognised courses and to be absent from work while retaining their wages. The employer cannot refuse but must agree to the schedule of the leave. After training, the employer seeks reimbursement from the government by filing a claim.

For certification of skills, the worker can get a maximum of eight hours per year, but only the day of the exam counts

### **Sports sector**

The VTS does not have a specific budget set aside for costs related to providing validation since these costs can be quite variable and ad-hoc based on demand. Overall one person within the administration works full time on all validation dossiers. In addition, depending on the dossier three to four people are needed for the validation Commission and five to six people are needed to work on the dossier and assessments.

The administration costs to follow a validation procedure at the VTS are EUR 60. If it is decided that the applicant can start an assessment then the following costs apply:

- Initiator: EUR 100
- Instructor B: EUR 200
- Trainer B: EUR 300
- Trainer A: EUR 400<sup>25</sup>

### **The Socio-cultural and Youth sector**

The use of the Oscar tool by the organisations is not supported anymore by the Flemish government.

## **9.3 Evidence of benefits to individuals**

The stated aim of validation in the Flemish Community is to help individuals to achieve personal development and increased integration into the labour market and society in general. Work experience certificates contribute for instance to a higher level of employment and to easing tensions on the labour market. In Flanders validation is also about improving access to formal education systems, shortening formal educational pathways and stimulating lifelong learning. For instance, validation in higher education can be used to access higher education programmes or to obtain credits leading to shorter study duration or to the award of a degree.

There are no recent studies on benefits to individuals. The 2010 EU Inventory report stated the results of a study on beneficiaries' experience and the effect of a work experience certificate through a survey with 320 candidates and 45 employers (2009) launched by the Department of Work and Social Economy. The findings indicated that for the candidates, these certificates have an important subjective value. All the candidates stated that these certificates mean a lot to them and that they grew in self-confidence, self-awareness and pride. 70 % of the candidates stated that they have improved their position on the labour market (although no statistics are available to support this statement). 90 % of the candidates would do the procedure again and as many candidates are promoting the procedure with friends and colleagues.

For employers, the certificates bring increased transparency and enable the matching of required skills with the talents of individuals. When new employees are being recruited, the work experience certificates provide immediate confirmation of their professional competences. For existing employees, work experience certificates may also prove to be useful for the optimum deployment and utilisation of talents within the company and for the

<sup>25</sup> The EVC-EVK procedure guide on [http://www.bloso.be/VlaamseTrainersschool/AanbodOpleidingen/Documents/120322\\_EVC-EVKGids.pdf](http://www.bloso.be/VlaamseTrainersschool/AanbodOpleidingen/Documents/120322_EVC-EVKGids.pdf)

development of a strategic training policy. The organisation of shorter training pathways is cost-saving and it increases the chances of success. The work experience certificate therefore further encourages companies to use a skills approach as a point of departure for their human resources policy.

With regard to the competence documents that can be obtained via Oscar or other portfolio-instruments in the socio-cultural and youth sectors it was explained that these have a lower civil effect than the validation documents issued in other policy areas.

## 9.4 Beneficiaries and users of validation processes

### 9.4.1 Validation trends

Below are data with regard to flows of beneficiaries presented per sector. Overall the number of candidates participating in a validation dossier or a work experience certificate is still relatively low. This is mainly because of the limited knowledge of the public of the existence of these possibilities<sup>26</sup>.

#### **Higher Education**

The administration collects data for the whole of higher education. The figures for the largest Flemish association, namely the KU Leuven Association<sup>27</sup>, for the academic years from 2007-2008 until 2014-2015 are presented below.

In total, 734 validation dossiers have been started over the seven academic years within the KU Leuven Association. In the last three years, there has been a substantial decline in the number of validation dossiers (in 2014-2015: 53 dossiers). Of the number of considered dossiers (694), 653 were (partly) assigned and 59 were not. In terms of study areas covered, the highest number of assigned dossiers were in education (250) followed by commercial and business sciences (140), and health care (134). The majority of requests were for the professional bachelor (75 %) followed by the academic bachelor (18 %). Only 3 % of requests were for a master programme.

Since the start of validation in higher education, only 10 dossiers have been submitted to obtain a full qualification. The majority of these are at the level of professional bachelor.

Considering the significant decline in dossiers within the KU Leuven Association over the last two years, the institutions were asked what the potential reasons for this decline could be. The following reasons were stated:

- Less advertising of the procedure has been undertaken by some institutions because it is too expensive or the procedure is under revision;
- The possibility of obtaining a bachelor in nursing via HBO5<sup>28</sup> which already leads to exemptions based on the qualification makes it only worthwhile to start a validation procedure if candidates have a lot of work experience. This might have decreased the need for validation in this study area;

It is not clear at the moment why the demand for validation in the teacher training programme has decreased.

<sup>26</sup> Discussion note 'Towards an integrated EVC-policy', 19 July 2011.

<sup>27</sup> The KU Leuven Association is considered to be the biggest of the five associations. With almost 100 000 students, the KU Leuven Association accounts for 43 % of the entire student population in Flemish higher education. The data of one institution is not complete.

<sup>28</sup> Or higher vocational education. In order to avoid confusion with higher vocational education provided in the Netherlands, it is called HBO5 since 2009. It matches the European education level 5 whereas the Dutch higher vocational education matches the education level 6: Bachelor. In the Flemish HBO5, programmes can be found which previously were called tertiary education. HBO5 is, as a qualification level, situated between secondary and higher education.

Another explanation for the lower number of dossiers is that the accreditation of prior formal learning (proven by qualifications obtained and with procedures free of charge) is more developed than before, therefore people can be given exemptions solely based on the qualifications they already have. This diminishes the need for procedures of validation of competences. The procedure for the validation of competences remains important mostly for people who have relevant work experience but no qualifications that lead to exemptions.

At the moment, some initiatives have been taken for cooperation between the different institutions within the KU Leuven Association. Mostly this happens where there is a relatively high number of dossiers. The KU Leuven Nursing Department has established an Assessment Centre that provides assistance to all institutes providing validation of prior learning in nursing education (there is for instance a pool of assessors and experts in guidance). There are plans to set up such a centre for the teacher training department and it would also be beneficial for training in physical education. It could also prove to be useful to consider cooperation where there is not much expertise because only a few candidates submit a request. In this case it is important to look at what types of cooperation might be desirable: division of expertise, shared assessors, common development of instruments, central assessment or partner assessment etc. Some of these new ways of cooperation are already being implemented. For example, one institution refers validation dossiers with regard to the teacher training programme to another institution. Overall though it is felt by stakeholders in this sector that it is not desirable to have common assessment instruments for every study field also because some instruments are very specific to the study area. Students do not tend to 'shop' between institutions because they would have to pay for that and also because it is not immediately clear how many exemptions will be obtained. 'Shopping around' tends to take place more often for free procedures such as the entrance examination and the recognition of prior qualifications.

However, collaboration requires investments. Yet, investing in collaboration is hindered as long as the costs outweigh the benefits for the individual institutes.

#### **Work sector**

Between 2006 and end December 2012 7 475 assessments undertaken and 4 232 work experience certificates granted. For 2012 only, 826 people received a certificate.

In the top 5 professions in which work experience certificates are obtained one can find: dental assistant (14.4 %); forklift driver (12.1 %); employment consultant (11.5 %); cleaner (11.1 %) and social interpreter (8 %).

Between 2006 and end December 2015, 11 897 validation dossiers have been started and 7 070 work experience certificates were granted. In 2015, 829 people received a certificate.

The top five professions in which work experience certificates are obtained are: forklift driver (26.35 %); child care attendant (9.63 %), employment consultant (9.21 %); social interpreter (7.31 %); and, cleaner (6.3 %).

### **9.4.2 Validation users**

#### **Higher Education**

The majority of candidates tend to be women which is linked to the fact that the majority of requests are in the education and health care sectors. For example, at the University of Antwerp, 90 % of the candidates are women. Almost half of the candidates had secondary education as the highest obtained qualification. There were nearly no candidates without a secondary education qualification. However, if a candidate with no secondary education qualification but with relevant work experience were to apply for the procedure, they should be served.

#### **Work sector**

In terms of employment status of the candidates following a validation procedure, 62.23 % of candidates were employed as an employee or self-employed in 2012 whereas the percentage of job seekers (37.77 %) was a substantial increase compared to 2011 (i.e. 29.01 %). Especially for the professions forklift driver and employment consultant, it is job seekers who try to obtain a work experience certificate. In terms of age group, the largest group obtaining certificates in 2012 were the 26 to 44 years old with 53.99 %. Furthermore, there has been a significant increase of those older than 55 years old (19.3 %) in 2012 whereas a decrease in the 16 to 25 years old obtaining work experience certificates (12.47 %) was observed. Finally, in terms of education level, of those following a validation procedure in 2012, 31.17% were educated at lower level; 42.78 % at medium level and 25.04 % at high level. The latter can be found especially in three new professions, namely: social interpreter (35.53 %) and employment consultant (29.41 %) and trainer/supervisor (10.12 %).

### **Socio-cultural and youth sectors**

Recent data shows that more than a hundred organisations have procedures for validation of competences, for instance making use of Oscar and this use is spread over seven sectors. Approximately 29 000 competence documents have been awarded between 2009 and 2015 in this sector. The use of Oscar has been increasing since its creation in 2008, but it is not clear how the use will evolve given the recent decision of the government not to support this tool anymore.

**Table 9.1** Number of organisations involved and number of validation procedures between January 2009 and April 2015), by sector

Sector	Number of organisations that validate competences	Number of validation procedures	Validation of competences acquired through courses	Validation of competences acquired through experience
Youth Work	60	11 435	8 333	3 107
Socio-cultural work for adults	33	16 009	15 544	465
Student Councils	1	0	-	-
Local Youth Services	6	98	92	1
Heritage	8	710	590	120
Arts	2	18	18	-
Public libraries	2	889	888	1

### *Sports sector*

At the VTS around 10 to 15 people a year undergo the validation procedure and this number has been only slightly increasing since the start in 2009. Most of the candidates obtain full exemption, around 20 % obtain one or more exemptions and about 10 % are not granted exemption.

### **9.4.3 Validation and migrants / refugees and other disadvantaged groups**

With regard to migrants and refugees, no specific procedures for the validation of non-formal and informal learning are available. Specific actions focus on awareness raising to enhance the use of validation procedures. Other actions concern language courses, preparatory courses and different types of support to help people integrate into the education system and labour market. In the near future, more initiatives will be developed in response to the refugee crisis. Within the group of non-Dutch speaking newcomers, special attention is paid to highly educated people. Universities, university colleges, the PES, centres for adult education and other stakeholders will be involved in such future developments.

### **Work sector**

The government gives specific attention to people who are part of risk groups such as ethnic minorities, older people, people with a lower level of education and people with a disability. The work experience certificate can strengthen the labour market position of these people. In 2012, around 82.97 % of the candidates were part of one of the risk target groups. Overall, since the start of the certificate in April 2006 until December 2012, 88 % of the candidates were from a risk target group<sup>29</sup>.

## **10 Validation methods**

The methods used and the validation process in the different sectors providing validation is broadly still the same as it was described in the 2010 EU Inventory report.

Overall, a validation procedure consists of three (or four) steps: 1) recognising/identifying an individual's competences ('documenting these competences can be seen as a separate step'); 2) assessing an individual's competences on the basis of evidence by comparing it with the standard and 3) validating by an accredited body the competences of an individual acquired in a non-formal or informal setting assessed on the basis of prior determined criteria and in accordance with a standard which then leads to certification<sup>30</sup>.

### **Higher education<sup>31</sup>**

In the higher education sector, the validation procedure is as follows:

- Applicants have to introduce a portfolio presenting relevant prior learning experiences to the university or university college of their choice;
- Assessment takes place in the university or university college based on the procedures outlined by the validation agency of the 'association', taking into account the learning outcomes of the programme applied for;
- Issuing of a competence certificate, valid in all member institutions of the association, which is the basis for access or waivers for certain courses in the programme.

The five associations have to set up a recognition service and define a procedure (these are developed at the level of the institution for their own programmes). Nevertheless, they are free to establish their own arrangements (centralised or decentralised organisation, application receivable all year round or at fixed periods, etc.). They only have to respect two restrictions introduced in the Decree: to define a regulation offering methodological and procedural guarantees to the candidate and to respect minimum rules concerning standards, methodology, procedures and quality assurance. Moreover, all associations propose a four-phase procedure: 1) information and guidance, 2) identification of the elements of competences gained through experience, 3) assessment and 4) certification. The methods of identification of learning outcomes are common and are used according to various configurations: structured interview, observation in situation, collection of information and evidence, interpretation of data, portfolio. The decision essentially is based on the following assessment criteria: authenticity (is the evidence a proof of the applicant's performance?), topicality (does the evidence reflect the applicant's current competence level?), relevance (is the evidence sufficiently matched with training courses?), quantity (does the evidence refer to a sufficiently long period of experience?) and variety of contexts (does the evidence refer to more than one context?). Experienced staff guide applicants during the preparation of

<sup>29</sup> Departement Werk en Sociale Economie in samenwerking met het Subsidieagentschap Werk en Sociale Economie en het ESF-agentschap, 'Jaarrapport ervaringsbewijs. 1 januari 2012 – 31 december 2012'.

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.evcvlaanderen.be>

<sup>31</sup> Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning. OECD Thematic Review. Flanders (Belgium). Country Note and Country Background Report.

their application. In all associations, there are clearly and nominally identified information documents.

Importantly, there are some key differences between the various associations in their approach towards validation. The KU Leuven Association works on the basis of a decentralised assessment model and the test matrices are developed at the level of the study programme within the institution. Moreover, whereas the Ghent Association has for example, a defined portfolio format for its institutions, the KU Leuven one does not work with one specific format given that a lot of practices had already been developed within the institutions. A number of common instruments have however been developed within KU Leuven such as the multiple short cases test for the nursing study programme in basket for office management and short cases test for orthopedagogics study programme. Even though working with a portfolio is the most common method used, it often proves to be difficult to assess all individual competences with this tool alone. Some of the associations also develop practice assessments and other broader assessment tools but only if there is sufficient demand.

The table below gives an overview of the most commonly used methods at the different stages of the validation process within the KU Leuven Association.

**Table 10.1 Most commonly used methods at the different stages of the validation process within the KU Leuven Association**

	Identification	Documentation	Assessment
Debate			
Declarative methods		X	
Interview	X		X
Observation		X	
Portfolio method			X
Presentation		X	X
Simulation and evidence extracted from work		X	X
Tests and examinations		X	X
Other (e.g. e-learning methods) – please specify			X Overall-assessment Skills-lab Reflection (after observation, presentation and simulation) (Multiple short) cases

A guiding principle in the procedures within the KU Leuven Association is that a judgement on the competences of the candidate is only made if competences can be assessed in two different ways.

The test matrix for the validation procedure in the Bachelor education (primary education) from the UCLL-Leuven<sup>32</sup> is presented below as a good practice.

**Table 10.2 The assessment instrument of the validation procedure for Bachelor education (primary education (KH Leuven))**

Inflow	Flow	Outflow
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<sup>32</sup> Formerly known as KH Leuven. .



	Inflow	Flow	Outflow
<b>General bachelor competences</b>	Knowledge and ability tests		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Limited portfolio assessment and competence orientated interview</li> <li>■ Casus test/Over All test</li> </ul>
<b>General teacher competences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Didactic aptitude test</li> <li>■ Practice test</li> <li>■ Portfolio assessment and competence orientated interview</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Skillslab agogic competences</li> <li>■ Simulation lesson</li> <li>■ Over All-test</li> <li>■ Limited portfolio assessment and competence orientated interview</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Over All test</li> <li>■ Portfolio assessment and competence orientated interview</li> </ul>
<b>Specific teacher competences</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Didactic tests (lesson plans)</li> <li>■ Simulation lesson</li> <li>■ Portfolio assessment and competence orientated interview</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ In service lesson</li> <li>■ Portfolio assessment and competence orientated interview</li> </ul>

#### Adult education

As mentioned before, the assessment of modules and the granting of exemptions are the exclusive competence of the centres for adult education and the centres for basic education. It is obvious that different validation procedures and techniques can be used in different centres. However some centres offering the same programmes (e.g. programmes for literacy and general knowledge, programmes for health care assistants (nursing auxiliary)) have cooperated towards more standardisation in validation procedures and techniques.

#### Work experience certificate

Candidates can demonstrate their competences in an interview or a practical test organised by assessment centres. The three main tools for assessment are:

- A **portfolio** (*'portfoliobeoordeling'*). This is an important step, but it is not compulsory. It consists of a detailed CV that must establish a link between the experience acquired by the applicant at work and the key competences outlined by the standard. In fact it constitutes, prior to the assessment process, a means for applicants to anticipate their chances to be successful in the final assessment and to decide if they should continue or not in the process.
- **Observation in situation** either reconstituted or simulated (*'praktijkproef'*). Applicants must demonstrate that they are able to perform all the tasks described in the standard. There is no partial recognition. If applicants cannot demonstrate all the competences stipulated by the standard, they are encouraged to reinforce them or to widen their professional experience. They can apply maximum twice in the same year, so when they have obtained the required competences (at work or in training sessions) they can return to the assessment centre.
- **Observation in real situations**. This is only the case for the nursing profession. The evaluation is conducted by two assessors. They both fill out a grid separately and compare results at the end. The test generally takes about one day (4-8 hours).

The Table 10.3 below provides an overview of the most commonly used methods by assessment centres at the different stages of the validation process. Blue is used to highlight which methods seem to be the most effective for the different stages of validation.

**Table 10.3 Most commonly used methods at the different stages of the validation process by the assessment centres**

	Identification	Documentation	Assessment
Debate			
Declarative methods			
Interview			
Observation			
Portfolio method			
Presentation			
Simulation and evidence extracted from work			
Tests and examinations			
Video			

#### *Sports sector*

The validation procedure provided by the VTS (started in 2009) consists of seven phases which are the following:

1. Preparation: during this phase the applicant is expected to check whether his or her competences correspond to those in the 'catalogue programme grids VTS'.
2. Application.
3. Registration and start of the validation procedure.
4. Composition of the portfolio.
5. Receptivity tests: after receipt of the portfolio the pedagogical division of the VTS checks on the basis of a guide whether the applicant is eligible to continue the rest of the procedure. If the application is deemed eligible, the candidate is invited to undertake a competence interview and a control test.
6. Competence assessment on the basis of the above results.
7. Feedback of the decision with the applicant.

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- Sport Vlaanderen / Flemish School for Sports Coaches
- Public Employment Service (PES) VDAB



## Country report Belgium-Flanders

2016 update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

The 2012 Council recommendation on validation encourages Member States to put in place national arrangements for validation by 2018. These arrangements will enable individuals to increase the visibility and value of their knowledge, skills and competences acquired outside formal education and training: at work, at home or in voluntary activities.

This country report is one of 36 that, together with a synthesis report and thematic reports, constitute the European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning. The inventory is a regularly updated overview of validation practices and arrangements in all Member States, EFTA countries and Turkey. It is a reference point for information on validation in Europe. It is organised around the principles defined in the 2012 Council Recommendation that were further elaborated in the European guidelines for validation. This is its sixth update (2004, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2014 and 2016).



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