

# ***emPOWERment to the people!***

## ***The learner as change agent in the Learning Society<sup>1</sup>***

Ruud Duvekot

*The ends and means of development call for placing the perspective of freedom at the center of the stage. The people have to be seen, in this perspective, as being actively involved – given the opportunity- in shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programmes.*

Amartya Sen (p. 53, 1999)

## ***Introduction***

We live in an age in which knowledge is becoming increasingly quickly outdated, the intensity of knowledge is growing and methods of learning and working are changing and becoming ever so complex. In this knowledge society it's up to everyone to acquire new knowledge and skills efficiently and effectively. In this setting interest is slowly but surely giving more attention to the high value of soft factors, the human capital besides 'hard' production factors such as machines and instruments. Of primary interest is human learning potential, capacity and flexibility, i.e. their employment potential. It makes no difference whether one is working, learning or seeking employment. The focus is on the degree in which you can be employed in and around the labour market and in other contributions that can be made to the society, such as voluntary work and private life.

Lifelong learning is vital for everyone and about making everyone's potential employable. People should be aware that they are always learning everywhere, and above all, not always in a conscious or self-chosen learning situation. The degree in which individuals and the knowledge society consciously build on this is however still strongly underexposed and under-utilised. The focus should be much stronger on the individual learning process. A complicating factor in dealing with this focus is that the formal procedures of teaching, training and assessment comprise only a very limited part of the individual learning potential or competencies. Competencies acquired in informal and non-formal situations are also essential for optimal performance on the labour market or in social functions in society. Lifelong learning, however is mainly implemented as a top-down strategy aiming at the adaption to the new circumstances of the learning-system and the labour market and the economic usage of its people. Lifelong learning should however be better put to work on a bottom-up strategy by taking account of the individual potential and his/her (possible) learning! This means, not exclusively focusing on the economic functions of learning but more on the autonomous development of

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<sup>1</sup> This text is based on the lecture *Validation of Prior Learning as a gateway to empowerment and development*, held at the international seminar 'Recognition and Validation of Prior Learning and Competences' of the Leonardo da Vinci-project 'TES, Developing Teacher's Evaluation and Assessment Skills', Lahti, Finland, September 30, 2008.

competencies and competence-development of its people. In this way *The Learning Society* will come to full bloom: a society in which the co-makingship of the people is valued and utilized.

Learning in *The Learning Society* is considered important or valuable, people are encouraged to invest in their potential throughout their lives by means of tailor-made learning – taking into account their prior learning - and the access to education and training is low-threshold. In other words, a society in which the Valuation of Prior Learning (VPL) is an important cornerstone of lifelong learning-strategies. VPL operationalises these strategies by means of bottom-up steered learning-processes. In this way VPL opens up the individual learner's perspective within the societal context.

This is the kind of lifelong learning which Giddens and Beck refer to as *reflexivity*, which is an expression of the transition to the modernity of *The Learning Society* (Giddens 1991; Beck, 1992). In their view modernity is characterized by the requirement placed upon individuals and institutions to reflect upon what they know in order to make their choices about who they are and how they behave. Giddens accentuated this theme with his notion of 'reflexive modernity' - the argument that, over time, society becomes increasingly more self-aware, reflective, and hence reflexive. In this perception, lifelong learning is a key characteristic of modernity in which meaning and identity are grounded in the self (individual) as the primary agent of change in the Learning Society. The economist Sen adds the perspective of learning as an instrumental freedom to this perception (Sen 1999). By this he links collective economic wealth to the social basis of individual well-being and freedom. And it's for a big deal up to the empowerment of the self to make use of this potential for the sake of him/herself and of the society.

The individual potential in the transitional society is the central theme of this article. The aim is to show the opportunities for people to shape their own destiny through lifelong learning. Personal development is seen as a dynamic process in which valuing prior learning (VPL) shows the many perspectives for the individual to invest in his/her learning potential. By focusing on the already existing learning potential of the individual the road is paved for lifelong learning that connects this potential - to be further developed - with society's needs. In this way personal development and employability are linked; after all, if the learner him- or herself is able to define, value and develop his/her full potential, he/she will be more employable and supportive to economic and/or social goals of society. In this sense VPL can be considered as a crucial factor in enabling a bottom-strategy for lifelong learning strategies.

The *European Guidelines for the Validation of Informal and Non-formal Learning* (EU 2008a) can be seen as 'a rough guide' to this transitional process in which VPL reveals certain perspectives for the individual learning potential. The *Guidelines* promote the routes from learning to certification. In one route VPL is designed as an integrated part of the existing formal education and training system. The second route treats VPL as an entirely separate process leading to distinctive recognition that bears no institutional, standards or certification link to the formal system. However, by going one step further than these two routes, the individual learner's potential could be activated for an even wider range of societal goals. Learning isn't about qualification only, it's also about empowerment for the sake of personal development, employability and citizenship in the making of the Learning Society. It's in this wider context that lifelong learning has a true meaning and VPL can open up a diversity of learning (or development) routes.

In the first chapter the transitional society is presented. The European policy favouring lifelong learning from 1995 onwards should be interpreted in this context. A critical reflection on *the European Guidelines* as a crucial step in the transition-process is part of this chapter. In order to broaden the effectiveness of these Guidelines the concept of the Learning Triangle is introduced as the playing field for designing lifelong learning strategies powered by VPL.

The second chapter sets the floor for VPL as an organising principle of lifelong learning in the Learning Society. The terminology and the two main approaches of VPL are explained in combination with listing the favourable preconditions for implementing effective VPL-systematics. The portfolio is introduced as one of the most important prerequisites for developing VPL.

The relevance of these preconditions is shown in the third chapter by explaining the inevitable road in Europe for enabling VPL. The Dutch and Finnish circumstances will highlight this road. This leads to the formulation of four main models for VPL-steered lifelong learning-strategies in chapter four. A few examples from different countries will provide more insight into these different models.

After setting the scene in this way the focus will be on the necessary personal approach and the role of self-assessment and of the assessor in making use of one's learning potential. This fifth chapter offers a view of the usability of VPL when looking at them from the individual perspective.

In the final chapter both conclusions and recommendations regarding the implementation of VPL-systematics as well as a roadmap for using *the European Guidelines* for this purpose are offered. Hopefully, it will contribute to more cooperation in Europe in the highly complex process of creating a new balance in the Learning triangle with the assistance of VPL-powered lifelong learning-strategies.

## 1. Transitions in society

In the current knowledge society, interest is slowly but surely shifting from 'hard' production factors such as machines and instruments to 'soft' factors, human capital and the "knowledge society." (Brinkley & Lee 2004) Of primary interest are human learning potential, capacity and flexibility. It makes no difference whether one is working, learning or seeking work. In the present society learning is still predominantly economically driven and focusing on employability. The transition to the Learning Society encompasses also the social dimension of learning: knowing who you are and how to use your talents. This empowerment of the self is preconditional for employability. It changes the nature of learning and challenges us to design lifelong learning-strategies for different societal purposes. In this sense, learning fits well into societal development as one of the so-called instrumental freedoms that contribute, directly or indirectly, to the overall freedom people have to live the way they would like to live (Sen 1999). Nobelprize-winner in economics Amyarta Sen formulated that 'social opportunities' as one of the five an instrumental freedoms refer to the arrangements that society makes for education, health care and so on which influence the individual's substantive freedom to live better. These facilities are not only for the sake of conducting private lives but also of more effective participation in economic and political activities. Learning affects people's private as well their public lives. Therefore, it is vital for people to have access – or better instrumental freedom – to all forms and phases of learning in order to shape their own destiny. As a supporting role, the state and the society have extensive roles in strengthening and safeguarding human capabilities, both for the self as for the society.

### 1.1 VPL and European policy

The transition in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the twentieth century from the industrial towards the knowledge society, and at present towards the Learning Society, is what lies at the heart of the debate on lifelong learning. This transition shows that the aim of lifelong learning strategies is to find a balance between top-down and bottom-up learning processes. Top-down learning is characterized by the efforts to make the existing standards in learning (the degree programmes) and in working (human resource management) more transparent and flexible; bottom-up learning is aimed at the citizen making career choices based on a wider range of opportunities that are created by means of self-management of competencies. Both strategies need to be output oriented, i.e. focused on the content of the expected competence or level of functioning, in order to create a successful balance between both processes. The output-oriented approach of learning-processes in the recommendation of the European Commission on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EU 2008b) highlights this change in approach. In this recommendation learning outcomes are defined as statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process, which are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence. In this way the learning result is the starting point or the output for setting up a lifelong learning strategy instead of the still commonly used input-orientation in which the standards designed by education and training systems are the starting point.

However, the formal procedures of teaching, training and assessment still describe only a very limited part of the individual learning potential or competencies. Competencies acquired in informal and non-formal situations are also essential for optimal performance on the labour market or in social functions. This complexity of individual learning and the opportunities it offers for the society were already recognised in 1995 in the White Paper of the European Commission "*Towards the Learning Society*" (EU 1995). While learning within the formal systems for education and training is a distinguishing factor of a modern society, learning that takes place outside this sphere is much more difficult to identify and value. "Lifelong Learning" was proposed as a central organising concept and "Valuation of Prior Learning" became one of the key messages (EU 2001). 'Valuation of Prior Learning' stands for the process of recognising participation in and outcomes of formal or non-formal learning, in order to raise awareness of the intrinsic worth of both types of learning and to reward learning. With the proposals of the Commission, the invisibility of all sorts of learning processes was effectively problematised. This problem was related to all levels of the individual (different employability-potential,

knowledge and application levels) and society (all levels: international, national, regional, local, sectoral and organisation).

So, it is true to say that in the last decades the focus in lifelong learning policies is slowly shifting from the traditional approach of 'learning in the classroom' to the wish to utilise 'other learning environments' such as the working environment, independent learning, distance learning, implicit learning and leisure activities. It actually meant making use of formal as well as non-formal and informal learning. This started up the general process of identification, assessment, valuation and accreditation of all formal, non-formal and informal learning. But still the valuing itself still follows the formal accreditation system, mainly in conformity with formal job descriptions, instead of becoming an individual means to personal ends focusing on one's career-opportunities. Lately, for instance in the European Common Principles on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (EU 2004), we see a shift to a broad concept of valuing competencies that are developed in all possible learning environments. The European Guidelines for the Validation of Informal and Non-formal Learning confirm this notion and, what is more, propose to further harmonise and clarify validation approaches and methods across national boundaries (published version November 2008; EU 2008a).

Within the concept of Valuation of Prior Learning, the identification, recognition and accreditation of non-formally and informally acquired competencies aims at the recognition and accreditation of prior learning and further development. This concept is regarded as the main organising principle for lifelong learning strategies. It is not designed to highlight the lack of knowledge and skills but precisely the opposite – to take stock of existing knowledge and skills: in other words, rather than being half empty, the focus takes the view that the glass is half full! (WG EVC 2000).

To get a good grip on this broad, almost holistic focus on learning I prefer to relate to it as a process of valuating prior learning. This captures in my belief quite adequately the integral process of promoting participation in and outcomes of (formal, informal or non-formal) learning, in order to raise awareness of its intrinsic worth and to reward and further develop learning. Furthermore, valuation shows the real human potential (of the person) on the basis of the analysis and valuation of personal competencies; it even adds lifelong learning as a personal strategy. In this sense Valuation of Prior Learning (VPL) is the overarching term to describe the process of assessing and validating personal competencies within the socio-economic context and offering a personal development strategy. VPL is focused on the individual perspective and makes the (public and private) system customer-driven for the sake of personal development. Organisations benefit from VPL since individuals can always be developed within their context.

With its focus on the individual, VPL is inseparable from personal and societal applications of lifelong learning. This becomes evident if we look at the four principal strategic features of lifelong learning (OECD 2004):

1. lifelong learning approaches the supply and demand of learning opportunities as part of an integrated system that incorporates the whole personal life cycle and all forms of learning,
2. the learner takes a central place here. Demand-driven learning, focused on meeting the learning needs of individuals is the key,
3. self-motivation is absolutely crucial, in other words learning to learn,
4. the learning process in itself can serve various purposes: from personal development and knowledge acquisition to economic, social or cultural benefits.

To sum up, the focus on learning in the transitional society is becoming more and more integral or even holistic; learning serves a diversity of goals, is building up on the basis of prior learning, is flexible in its construction and implementation and is strongly individually steered and contextualised. In order to maximize the effects of the use of prior learning as an important building block of lifelong learning-strategies it is essential to know the right preconditions for empowering the individual by implementing VPL and the different dimensions of the process: recognition, assessment, accreditation or validation, valuation and development of prior learning.

## 1.2 The European Guidelines: a critical reflection

The formulation of “the fundamental principles underpinning validation” represents the crucial step that ‘Valuation of Prior Learning’ as a guiding principle for lifelong learning strategies has to take. These principles address both the top-down approach - the policy-level (EU-mobility and learning space) - as well as the bottom-up approach – the implementation of validation on ‘the working floors’ of the labour market and in the learning system. Focusing on the implementation a few options and suggestions for activating these principles arise. Below is suggested how to strengthen the principles by offering concrete instrumentation. Important is to start a debate on the way to use these principles or guidelines. The best option is to stimulate and speed up the effective implementation both top-down as well as bottom-up of VPL in as many contexts as possible; the worst they could do is creating barriers or bureaucracy to this implementation.

*The European Guidelines* are formulated in ten principles:

### 1) *Validation must be voluntary:*

Validation for whichever purpose should not only be voluntary but also individual-steered. This calls for giving explicit individual rights for documentation, assessment and development (learning time and funding-vouchers). These rights can be supported by:

- a. Showing the ways to get access to VPL and the learning system. Exploring this access should be very low-thresholded and maybe even an enjoyable activity. After all, VPL is about showing first of all my talents and opportunities to myself.
- b. ‘*Validation for dummies*’: a how-to guide for organisations and individuals;
- c. Training-modules: self-management of competencies for individuals (who am I and what is my potential?) and organisations (what’s our mission and what’s got human capital to do with that?). Example: see [www.ch-q.nl](http://www.ch-q.nl) (English subsite)
- d. Annual publication for all citizens with overview of their learning, funding and counselling opportunities in the field of lifelong learning strategies.

### 2) *The privacy of individuals should be respected:*

Portfolio-formats should be available (electronically or on paper), safeguarded by making sure that:

- it is *My portfolio* that is at the basis of formulating learning needs and career steps, with or without a dialogue with my employer
- *My portfolio* is private and I decide what to show in a showcase.
- Showcases are the parts of *My portfolio* that might be public, when *I accept this*.

### 3) *Equal access and fair treatment should be guaranteed:*

This principle entails a policy of creating ‘no-thresholds’ for recognition, validation and development of my competencies. Most existing validation-procedures are time- and money-intensive. It should be better in the case of this principle to focus on facilitating validation for the users by cheap and easy access to self-assessment and self-diagnostics, favourably on the internet or intranet. Companies, schools and labour agencies can supply and support these instruments. Regardless of the perspective I’m looking for, there should also be a help-desk with quick response available: an advisor walking around and/or virtual advisor.

### 4) *Stakeholders should be involved in establishing systems for validation:*

This principle is about co-makingship and mutual responsibilities. The main effort needed is to formulate the specific learning outcomes for a sector, branche or company/organisation. Only then real matchmaking between stakeholders on the basis of learning outcomes is effective, which include:

- the available competencies in *My portfolio*,
- the needed competencies in the organisation’s or sectoral competence management (job profiles embedded in competence management or human resource management),
- the competencies in the standards of VET and HE (ready for acquiring, upgrading or enrichment).

Matching involves all parties and shows where the bridges are between my goals (qualification, getting a job, keeping a job or personal development) and the goals/needs in society’s organisations.



5) *Systems should contain mechanisms for guidance and counselling of individuals:*

In order to be able to meet the different standards I would like to challenge, it is necessary to have advisors available as:

- portfolio-guiders: how to work on my portfolio and document my learning results?
- The UK Union Learning Representatives are a good example of how to speak on the right level and in the same language as their colleagues about learning opportunities,
- Assessment-guiders: how to prepare for a specific assessment: tips and tricks,
- Also guidance for organisations/schools/etc. that are formulating their specific standard for assessing people and make sure this standard is transparent,

The kind of advisors needed ask for a structural supply of training courses and management for updating these advisors: a master course for advisors on self-management of competencies and masterclasses for updating?

6) *Systems should be underpinned by quality assurance:*

To prevent a new quality control-bureaucracy it is recommended to set a 'quality-light' procedure for Validation-procedures in place. Possibilities are:

- a) Any assessor should first have made his/her own portfolio and personal action plan; only then they can be given entrance to assessor-trainings;
- b) a professional register for assessors should guarantee the professionalism;
- c) every two-year a new accreditation for assessors guarantees their updating and upgrading, and therefore their quality.
- d) a European framework and a national application (context-steered). Ensuring the quality of assessors implies being able to refer to a standard for assessors: this standard has already been developed and made available in many EU-projects.

7) *The process, procedures and criteria for validation must be fair, transparent and underpinned by quality assurance:*

On top of the already mentioned quality-framework for assessors (see principle 6) it is also valuable to develop and apply a EU-standard for Validation-advisors as well. This implies the same set of training opportunities, professional registration and accreditation to be made available for these functionaries. With regard to the transparency of standards the quality could be assured in the same way as the validation of formal learning is traditionally organised. This implies not only transparent standards, in which non-formally and informally acquired competencies can be mirrored, but also building on the expertise of the existing exam committees in order for them to be able to validate these kinds of competencies. In the case of validation for career-opportunities a standardisation implies increasing expertise amongst employees. For both groups of functionaries this expertise should be offered by means of a made to measure learning programme, including personal portfolio build-up ('practice what you preach'), validation and then the necessary development steps.

8) *Systems should respect the legitimate interests of stakeholders and seek a balanced participation:*

This principle can best be understood by the following statements:

- a) *Validation* reveals the real human potential on the basis of the analysis and valuation of personal competencies;
- b) *Validation* is the process of (a) assessing and validating personal competences within the social-economic context and (b) offering a personal development-strategy;
- c) *Validation* focuses on the individual perspective and makes the (public and private) system customer-driven for the sake of personal development;
- f) Organisations benefit from *Validation* since individuals develop within their context.
- g) a validation-process in general consists of five phases:
  - o commitment and awareness of the value of one's competencies,
  - o recognition of personal competencies,
  - o valuation and/or validation of these competencies,
  - o (advice on the) development of one's competencies and finally
  - o structurally embedding this competence-based development process into a personal or organisation steered and owned policy.

9) *The process of validation must be impartial and avoid conflicts of interest:*

Impartiality can only be guaranteed if an assessment is carried out by at least two independent assessors. These assessors should not be in positions where they might benefit financially from the development of the candidate's competencies. Neither should assessors be employed from the same organisation as the individual that is being assessed.

In the case of self-assessment and self-diagnostics, instruments should be free of charge with a 'no strings attached' assurance. Every citizen should have access to these instruments.

10) *The professional competences of those who carry out assessments must be assured:*

The basis for a programme for professionalization is laid by the two main routes as described in the European Guidelines for the Validation of non-formal and informal learning. These two routes point out the main directions that Valuing Lifelong Learning can show to target groups: summative or formative development. It is even possible to follow a third route in a combination of summative and formative oriented lifelong learning. It's up to the key players in lifelong learning to help make the match between target groups and the learning system: the teachers, guiders and tutors from the field of empowerment.

The professionals in the VPL-process should be not only the assessors but also the guiders and the advisors; moreover they should be recruited from both the business and the education world.

The content of professionalization (on a European scale?) should include:

- a) An integral (international) training-programme for lifelong learning-advisors, assessors and guiders
- b) A professional register for lifelong learning- & VPL-professionals (advisors, assessors and guiders), including maintenance of competence profiles for these professionals
- c) Internationally recognised certification of lifelong learning- & VPL-professionals
- d) International conferences to facilitate European communities of these professionals and to offer yearly update/upgrade programmes for the professionals
- e) National expert groups and/or communities
- f) External evaluation of national or sectoral approaches
- g) A European training programme for 'self management of competencies' incl. EU-portfolio (formats)
- h) Advice on sustainable embedding the programme in initial education and training and in human resource-systems

### 1.3 Balance in the Learning triangle

When looking at these supportive European Guidelines it is important to take the turn from generic policy-making to national implementation. For this reason *The glass is half full* (WG EVC 2000), an agenda setting policy paper from the Dutch government and the social partners, was written. Soon after publication it became the basis for a national implementation strategy with the start of a national knowledge centre on VPL. Its goal was to promote and disseminate good practices on VPL and to research the critical success factors for implementation in organisations and schools.

*The Glass is half full* indicated that VPL features three main actors: the *individual*, the *organization* and the *knowledge infrastructure* (or 'schools' with education and training, guidance and job-support). The macro-level of governmental authorities and social partners facilitates the interaction in the learning triangle with laws, regulations and seed money. VPL shows the way in which these actors can work together in order to organize lifelong learning-strategies. The interaction between actors is based on the recognition, valuation, validation and activation/re-activation of an individual's potential, with respect to the diversity of goals and contexts.

The learning triangle highlights learning processes with a summative and/or formative tint.

Determinate for the typology of VPL are the mutual relationships between the actors. These relate to the roles of the actors in determining the content and structure of the learning processes, ranging from initial professional training to human resource development in the workplace. Together these processes constitute the overall structure for lifelong learning strategies that might differ in their goals and context but are sharing VPL as an organising principle. The learning triangle in this perspective



can be seen as the playing field for lifelong learning strategies. Its constituent parts are the individual, the organisation and the school with their own respective learning responsibilities: self-management of competencies, competence management and competence-based curricula and guiding tools. The balance of power is flexible, and is dependent on goal and context of learning (Duvekot 2006).

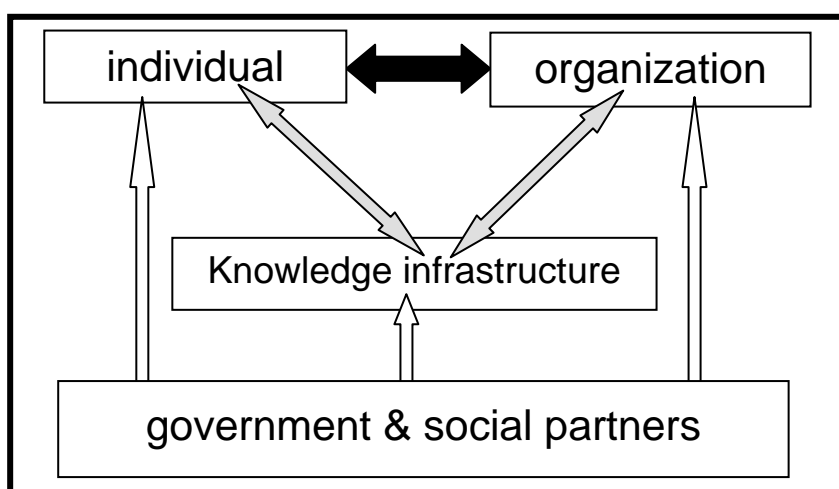
The ideal balance between the actors in the learning triangle is a situation in which:

- the individual realizes that he/she will be engaging in lifelong learning no matter what, and documents these learning experiences. The goal of VPL is stimulating self-investment in learning and showing present and future learning outcomes;
- organizations know what they need and can express it, and can make clear their ever changing needs for competencies. The goal of VPL is facilitating employees' self-investment and articulation of the organisation's need for competencies;
- the knowledge infrastructure supports individual and organization through learning- and guidance-services. The goal of VPL is matching learning and guidance to personal needs; steering learning outcomes and career-advice.
- at macro-level the legislative and regulatory situation creates conditions beneficial to VPL.

Figure 1 shows this balance in the ideal-typical model of the learning triangle in the Learning Society. The organization of lifelong learning strategies reveals relationships between actors on equal footing in terms of authority and aim at using the maximum possible summative and formative aspects. The target group comprises everyone that benefits from their own learning experiences or that can provide proof for their determination to apply lifelong learning strategies; the mobility of the target group is inter-sectoral because competencies are also recognized across sectors and professional training is no longer aimed solely at one particular career in one particular company.

The black arrow in the figure below shows the primary process in which communication regarding content and form of the required professional training takes place. The grey arrows show the secondary process or the support of the primary process; in this example support is provided via custom work from educational organisations. The white arrows reflect the role of the underlying conditions required to activate and sustain the whole process. This lifelong learning model assumes that lifelong learning takes place on the basis of coordination between individual learning biographies (portfolio with documented learning experiences) and the competence needs of organizations (transparent formulation of demand), supported by learning-made-to-measure from the knowledge infrastructure. Issues such as financing, rights and obligations, quality assurance and accessibility are organised at the macro-level.

**Figure 1: The Learning Society (near future)**



Source: Duvekot 2006

Be aware that this is the ideal-typical situation to which VPL as an organising principle of lifelong learning is moving to in the near future. Nevertheless, most features of this figure are already in place. The next step of actually connecting the partners in the learning triangle in a VPL-fashion, i.e. competence- and learning outcome-based recognition, valuation and validation of prior learning, is close at hand. What we need to unfold is the following:

- 1) Within this learning triangle various matches are made between the primary actors. The first option is a match between an employee's portfolio and an organisation's competence management. It is essential for organisations on the labour market to have a clear picture of the ways in which they manage competencies. This means being able to clearly articulate and formulate competence requirements or competence profiles, even within today's rapidly changing market in which job positions are becoming increasingly flexible. In addition, they have to be able to recognise and measure the – partially changeable – need for competencies in their employees, and draw conclusions on which competencies are satisfactory and which competencies require more work or development. They must then invest in their staff and work to strengthen the missing, weak, or even the stronger competences among their staff. Employees are active participants in this process, since the match between the organisation's required competencies and the present competencies takes place on the basis of the employee's portfolio. The organisation may be a profit, non-profit, volunteer or school organisation. Even human resource organisations are organisations that need to be able to detect the need for competencies in their environment, in order to suit the needs of their clients.
- 2) The second match within the learning triangle is aimed at education, taking into account the learning biography and the concrete learning needs of the client. Education, consisting of the public and private schools available, professional training and other institutions for education, can support this strengthening of knowledge and skills by introducing self-assessments or self-scans, intake assessments and procedures for recognizing acquired competencies and then offering custom-made educational programmes, with content and structure that has been tailored to the learning needs and demands of the individual.
- 3) The final match within the learning triangle focuses on connecting the competence management of an organisation with the competence content of a school's educational programmes and/or guidance. Guidance can also be provided by professional and public agencies for job support. This means being able to efficiently connect each other's competence systems for the benefit of creating a communal lifelong learning strategy. Thanks to this connection to their portfolio, staff and Human Resource professionals in an organisation can make cross-overs between both systems. The goals of these cross-overs are diverse and focus on individual educational and career applications. At an organisational level these cross-overs lead to a more effective talent management as well as to a better synchronisation between education and the labour market.

The following chapter discusses the achievements that VPL already has made with regard to its role as an organising principle for lifelong learning. A number of issues require elaboration: the questions of accessibility, civil effect and quality assurance and the questions surrounding the form and content of lifelong learning. These issues are fundamental with regard to individual empowerment and organizational employability. In other words, is the learning triangle capable of effectively utilising VPL?

## 2. Valuation of Prior Learning as principle and process

Lifelong learning is based on the assumption that *initial education is no longer enough for a lifetime social-economic career*. It is more important for people to develop their competences (skills, knowledge, attitude & ambitions) throughout life by realising that 'their glass is already half filled' and by understanding that everyone always learns in every possible learning environment: formal (school), non-formal and informal environments (working place, at home).

### 2.1 Goals and preconditions

Lifelong learning above all means 'Valuation of Prior Learning', i.e. valuing *the Learning* that is constantly taking place and learning *the Valuing* in order to start up stimulating and developing lifelong learning in an effective and efficient way. Valuation of Prior Learning in this respect is not only a process underpinning lifelong learning strategies but also the organising principle for designing these strategies.

Evidence for this approach comes from the European research project "Managing European Diversity in lifelong learning 2005-2007". (Leonardo project NL/05/C/F/TH-81802; see also Duvekot et al, 2007). The research aimed at showing the outline of the learning society by analysing case studies in the profit, non-profit and voluntary sectors in eleven European countries. The analysis showed that 'Valuation of Prior Learning' is as much a principle as a process, giving true evidence of the transition from the present knowledge society towards the learning society. Society changes to a learning society where the need for a good balance of power between the main stakeholders in lifelong learning - individuals, organisations and the learning system - will be reshaped and the learner will get a real say in designing lifelong learning strategies. The main changes of this transition will be reflected on five levels:

- a. Economically, aiming at getting and/or keeping a job (employability),
- b. Socially, aiming at motivation, reintegration, self-management of competences and personal development (empowerment),
- c. Educationally, aiming at qualification, updating, upgrading or portfolio-enrichment by means of creating output-oriented standards focusing on learning outcomes and learning made to measure,
- d. A fourth level on which the change is having its impact, can also be distinguished, the civil society, aiming at social activation, voluntary activities, societal awareness & reintegration and citizenship (activating citizenship),
- e. On the macro-level finally, authorities and social partners are responsible for organising the match between these levels by means of legislation, regulations, labour agreements, fiscal policy, training funds, etc.

'Valuation of Prior Learning' as an organising principle reflects the change towards a learning society in which the individual learner has and takes more responsibilities for his/her own, personal learning process. It also means that the individual learner changes the existing 'balance of power' in learning processes because he/she will be steering lifelong learning too with a portfolio. In this portfolio, the learning outcomes that he/she has achieved are documented together with the relevant evidence. In many cases the portfolio even encompasses an action plan for personal development. Such portfolios create a new balance within learning as a process and contribute to the individual's social identity; above all, they show the road-map for personal development in the context of the organisation and the society.

The emphasis on learning outcomes is in line with the development of common structures of education and training across Europe and is associated with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and the European Qualification Framework (EQF). Thus Valuation of Prior Learning as such contributes to the removal of barriers to the mobility of labour between countries and between sectors. At national levels, learning outcomes are made a central part of the modernisation of qualification systems and frameworks in order to innovate Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education (HE), to stimulate economic development and to promote social cohesion and citizenship. These goals of 'Valuation of Prior Learning' are shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Goals of ‘Valuation of Prior Learning’**

<i>Individual</i>	Stimulating self-investment in learning; showing learning outcomes; building up a learning biography or portfolio
<i>Organisation</i>	Building up competence management and facilitating employees' self-investment and articulation of competences; designing lifelong learning strategies in Human Resource Management
<i>VET/HE</i>	Matching learning to real learning needs; offering learning-made-to-measure; focus on learning outcomes; facilitating lifelong learning strategies
<i>Civil Society</i>	Activating citizenship; transparency of learning outcomes in the civil society; linkages with other perspectives (qualification, careers)
<i>Macro-level</i>	Concerns policies of governments and social partners and their responsibilities for creating favourable conditions for lifelong learning through laws and regulations
Source: Duvekot et al, 2007	

Important preconditions for creating a learning society in which these benefits come to full bloom:

1. A transparent, output-oriented knowledge infrastructure;
2. Creating trust by (a) focusing on the already available quality-system based on the judgement of the existing assessment processes used by schools, colleges and universities and (b) prospective quality-management by introducing external peer-reviews on quality-issues for the future;
3. A transparently structured education sector, that allows a flexible flow of participants from one layer of sector to another, both intra- as well as inter-sectoral;
4. Universal, transparent and interchangeable procedures and reports on the competences that have been valued;
5. Close relations between educational institutions and their associates/partners (enterprises, government institutions, institutions in the field of (re)integration of unemployed into the labour market);
6. Creating possibilities for developing and executing individual tailor made learning paths;
7. Facilities for financing flexible tailor made individual learning routes, such as an individual learning account;
8. Clear communication to citizens about the technical and financial arrangements for education and ‘Valuation of Prior Learning’;
9. Development of an individual right for portfolio-assessment and career-advice.

## 2.2 Terminology

The international commonly used term for validating and Valuation of Prior Learning is Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL). The authorities, as well as the social partners and schools prefer this term because this approach mainly focuses on the summative effects of recognizing and assessing prior learning. The most important element in an APL-strategy is the assessment of the competencies that are collected in a portfolio with the goal of getting exemptions or a diploma. The portfolio is in this context mainly a showcase of only the competencies that matter for the standard itself; all the other personal competencies are irrelevant. The choice for a specific standard is in practice more steered by the availability of an actual standard than by a free, personal choice. This is because most of the times a school - as the keeper of the standard(s) – tends to look more to the best chance of success when measured against any given standard than to the best match of a standard and personal ambitions. So, in effect, APL is more steered by standards, and as most standards are kept by schools (upper secondary and higher vocational levels) this shows that APL really is strongly steered by schools.

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

It is interesting to see that, in several countries – United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Finland - a shift occurs in the focus of lifelong learning strategies from Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) towards Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). This is due to the growing awareness on the real societal problematics, namely how to make people invest in themselves if the necessary infrastructure is available (funds, methods, instruments and functions). With RPL 'the job might be done' in a bottom-up way. RPL is more and more seen as the real matchmaker with the more top-down strategy of APL.

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

Competence is a central concept in VPL. Without a good understanding of this concept little can be achieved with VPL. 'Competence' means having adequate knowledge of how to act in a particular situation. Whether or not someone is competent becomes apparent based on how he/she acts (Lyotard 1988).

In other words, a competence is the sum of knowledge and skill: knowledge is 'the knowing' and skill is 'the acting'. A competence, then, encompasses knowledge and skill as well as the personal methods used in applying that skill. It is essentially based on personal attitudes and ambitions. For this reason, a competence value is only partially fixed, as this value is mainly personal. The way in which a competence reaches a particular, personal value is also a part of that competence. For that reason, I prefer Cedefop's definition, which states that a competence is an ability that extends beyond the possession of knowledge and skills. It includes: 1) cognitive competence; 2) functional competence; 3) personal competence; and 4) ethical competence ([www.cedefop.gr](http://www.cedefop.gr)). The 'personal competence' is particularly relevant, because it is this competence that 'colours' the generic description of a competence. It is only within this personal context that a competence can be identified, assessed, valued and developed (further).

Based on this concept of competence, VPL is particularly useful as an evaluation, not connected to the learning path, of the personal development of competencies. This perspective, however, reduces VPL to a kind of intake assessment. It also turns the individual into a passive learner. VPL's potential as a vision on personal development, however, as well as an instrument, is much larger than that. VPL needs to be used on a much larger scale, especially in approaches geared more towards the individual. After all, VPL can motivate the individual to take more initiatives in personal development. Educational institutions, companies and other organizations can then fine tune their educational and personnel policies in line with this.

### **2.3 Two approaches**

In particular, VPL makes it possible for a person to make an inventory of his/her competencies, allowing those competencies to receive a value and to be recognized; it is not a direct requirement that development steps are taken instantly, as this is up to the individual to decide. Recognizing and placing value on competencies is also known as the *passive* or *summative* VPL (or RPL/APL) approach. When VPL also stimulates further learning – that is, places a value on competencies – this is called *activating* or *formative* VPL. These are the two main streams within VPL.

The summative approach focuses on recognizing competencies within existing certificate and diploma structures. Based on this stream, VPL is an alternative route to certification. Summative VPL is limited to recognizing competencies (portfolio) and evaluating them. This VPL stream is mainly found in professional education as a kind of exemption policy.



The VPL system can also be used as an instrument for career formation: formative VPL. Awarding diplomas and certificates is then not a goal but merely a means of showing the progress a person has made in his/her personal development as a learning individual and what further progress can still be made. In other words, for the most part this concerns the development and execution of an individual's personal development plan. Formative VPL is strongly linked to career formation on each level of an individual's social participation: paid or unpaid activities and citizenship. Formative VPL links career formation that is mostly individual to the goals of labour market organisations or in labour agencies (Duvekot & Brouwer 2004).

The essential difference between both approaches is that in a summative VPL process the focus is on recognising someone's development in the form of 'paper pats on the back'. In this way, it is as if a snapshot is taken of someone's status quo, and paper proof such as diplomas, degrees or certificates is awarded as the official recognition for learning accomplishments.

The formative process, however, takes a deeper look. The objective is to direct your own movie. The formative approach, through its focus on career formation, has a broader pallet of recognition and appreciation: in addition to recognition through certification, value is also given through career steps, job rotation, successful reintegration, prevention of work disability, initiating independent entrepreneurship, etc. In this sense, summative VPL can be seen as a part of formative VPL. The reverse is almost impossible.

#### **2.4 From portfolio to *portfolio-loop***

The portfolio is one of the most important prerequisites for developing VPL. Portfolios are used to plan, organize and document education, work samples and skills. People use career portfolios to apply to school or training programs, get a job, get a higher salary, show transferable skills, and to track personal development.

In general there are three types of portfolio (Tillema 2001):

1. The dossierportfolio is used to document proof for getting exemptions in a specific degree or qualification programme. The proof consists of professional products and behaviour results. This portfolio acts as a showcase for a summative VPL-procedure. It is only filled with the necessary proof and is hardly steered by the candidate. Its nature is reflective.
2. The personal portfolio also aims at documenting learning results from the past. It is also used for summative VPL-procedures. However, the candidate first fills the portfolio with all his/her learning results. Only when deciding which standard will be used for a degree or qualification programme this portfolio becomes a showcase like the dossierportfolio. Its nature is also reflective.
3. The development-portfolio focuses on broad, personal reflection. Its nature is reflective as well as prospective. It is filled with all relevant, lifewide proof of the candidate. Its nature is diagnostic for summative as well as for formative purposes. It is strongly steered and managed by the candidate.

By working with a portfolio most people go through a cyclical process:

- Which of my competences are strong developed or weak?
- Which of my competences fit in with my career- or learning needs?
- How to show my value to others?
- How to develop myself further?

By asking these questions to themselves when looking at their development-potential, people can decide which portfolio-type will meet the personal ends. In all cases, the portfolio is taken as a starting point for new learning issues from a VPL-embedded situation. The entire VPL process, then, begins and ends with the portfolio since the new learning or development results will be added to the original portfolio. This enriched portfolio might at the same time be the basis for a new development steps and start a new VPL process. This is known as the "portfolio loop" (Duvekot 2006 & 2007).



### 3. From theory to practice: a European typology

Each European country has its own culture, identity, history and practices on education and training and also has its own approach and system for education and training. We describe this specific approach as the learning culture in a certain country. Since the learning cultures – and therefore, also the policy on ‘valuing learning’, which is based on this learning culture – can vary widely within Europe, the systems for ‘valuing learning’ also vary. Many countries have been involved with ‘valuing learning’ in one way or another, and it is interesting to study the various approaches in more detail. The concept and process of ‘Valuation of Prior Learning’ provides a perspective with which to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of each country’s systems and frameworks. This facilitates mutual knowledge exchange which is in the interest of all countries. It can be referred to as bench learning (Karlöf 2001) since the active learning of each other’s strong points takes place based on benchmarking.

#### 3.1 European Learning cultures

A cluster model was used in *Making Learning Visible* (Bjornavold 2000) to describe the various learning cultures. Mutual learning takes place through geographic proximity and institutional similarities of the countries within each cluster (see below for the cluster groups). This has led to the observation that, overall, ‘valuing learning’ approaches within each cluster often resemble one another.

In *The Unfinished story of ‘VPL in Europe* (Duvekot et al 2005) this model was adjusted in order to reflect the current situation in Europe. For example, Switzerland was added to the dual system. Furthermore, the French, Belgian and Dutch systems were added as three separate learning cultures, all three of them characterised by different types of top-down steering on implementing VPL. In the follow-up Leonardo-project *Managing European diversity in lifelong learning* this cluster-approach has been updated and used to analyse the variety of VPL-usage in Europe. The cluster model at present focuses on seven learning cultures. In the course of this project these learning cultures might be described in an even greater variety in order to catch (and respect) Europe’s diversity for the sake of embedding VPL on the levels of the learning individual, organisation and system. This finalised model is presented in the figure below.

Figure 3: Europe’s main learning cultures		
System	Characteristics	Countries
The dual system	Learning while working; social pacts; VET-levels	Germany, Austria, Switzerland
The Mediterranean approach	Regional; flexible and implicit	Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal
The North European model	Government-steered (legislation); regional; VET-levels; summative & formative	Norway, Denmark, Finland, Sweden
The Atlantic model	Demand-steered, summative oriented	England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Ireland
The Romanic System	Top-down; legislation; incl. HE	France, Belgium
The Low Countries model	Supply-steered; shared responsibilities; bottom-up implementation	The Netherlands
The East European model	Top-down; in transition due to entering EU	Bulgaria, Rumania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Hungary, Baltic States, Slovakia

Source: Duvekot et al. 2007

The typology of Finland and the Netherlands that comes out of this (highly) generic figure is of course open to criticism (see: OECD 2007). But the main features of both national learning cultures are visible. The most distinctive feature is the steering role of the government. The Dutch tradition is traditionally dominated by the 'polder-model', i.e. a model in which on national and sectoral levels and even on organisational level tripartite negotiations take place (Pleij 2005). Harmonisation is the key word in the Dutch way of designing, implementing and innovating society, i.c. the learning system. The Dutch government steers the process mainly by offering seed money and fiscal opportunities. The Finnish government passes laws that directly aim at operationalising the individual rights to the process of validation of prior learning. In addition to the competence-based qualification system, several laws were passed in the 1990s, to Enable individuals to access formal studies at different levels on the basis of their prior experience even if they couldn't meet the formal entry criteria. Also a legal framework for the validation of informal and non-formal learning in higher education institutions is in place (Cedefop 2008).

The focus in both countries is especially on the motivation of those with little or no education to participate in lifelong learning. This means that the process is to be made as accessible and flexible as possible for the individual to find the exact opportunity in relation to his/her need for continuing and further education and training.

Another interesting feature is the role of the social partners in both countries. The social partners in the Netherlands negotiate traditionally with the government about all aspects concerning the regulation of the labour market. This includes the division of responsibilities of the learning market; initial education and training of jobseekers are the primary responsibility of the government and the training of employees is the primary responsibility of the social partners. This therefore also affects the introduction of VPL-systematics for employees and job-seekers.

The Finnish private sector is very active in validation (Ecotec 2007a). Due to their integral role in the national competence-based qualification scheme, the involvement of social partners and individual companies in the validation of informal and non-formal learning is very strong. Many of the social partners are involved in tripartite working groups and committees in which education and training policies and related laws, including those related to the validation of prior learning (Nevala 2007).

### 3.2 Glancing at the Finnish and the Dutch situation

Analysing the general political, economic and social situation in both countries, a lot of similarities in the economy, geography, social organisation and the learning system are visible. Differences are also visible as we already pointed out but the similarities are much stronger, especially looking at the numerous challenges in the transition from the industrial and knowledge economy to the learning society both countries face. The main challenges facing Finland and the Netherlands are:

- Demographic development and ageing of the workforce. Within 5-10 years traditional recruitment won't be able to fill in the gap of the pensioned people. This has consequences involving organizations and the costs of, for example, pensions, health care and care for the elderly. In 2015, about 20 per cent of Finns will be aged 65 or older.
- The number of unskilled people (only basic school or less) remains very high. Of all the workers in the Netherlands and Finland more than 20% is in this group.
- The need for upskilling the workforce. The shortage of higher (vocational) educated people is rising. The percentage of higher educated workers will have to rise substantially while those levels for upper secondary VET-levels will roughly stay the same. The need for low- or unskilled labour will drop with more than 10% in comparison with the 2008-percentage.
- The need for attracting migrants. It is estimated that Finland and the Netherlands face a structural shortage of labour power in the near future. The Netherlands will be in need of several 100.000s full-time equivalents by 2050. In Finland, the minister of Finance stated that the country needs 1.8 million migrants already by 2025 to solve the problem of the ageing Finland's *silver economy* (TOI 2008). Only by starting now with attracting migrants (esp. from VET-level 3 upwards) this problem can be solved.
- The dependence of the economy on business services is rising rapidly. This calls for instance for more IT-specialists, knowledge-experts, financial and business-consultants and, above all, a need for upgrading the total workforce since there will be less diploma- and job-security. The future lies in

lifelong learning in order to reach out instead for work- (mobility) and competence-security, both for the sake of maintaining one's employability and empowerment.

- Both countries are famous for their organization of general consensus between the main stakeholders (government & social partners) concerning economical and social questions. This model however needs revision in order to communicate properly with the ones that have to work and learn: the individual citizens. In short, both countries face the same challenge in having to give to the citizen a proper share in the decision-making (or the balance of power) of the economic and social restructuring of society.

(Statistics FIN & Statistics NL 2008)

These challenges speak for themselves. Foremost they show the identical themes Finland and the Netherlands have to address and are already addressing. The introduction of VPL-systematics is one of the more fruitful and promising means both countries are picking up in order to make a more smooth transition to the Learning Society of which the learning Triangle is the cornerstone. And as we already saw in the first chapter the real innovation comes from the input and decision-making of 'the self', i.e. the learning and working individual or citizen. And that's where VPL-systematics comes to full bloom, namely when it is engaged in matchmaking between the constituent partners in the Learning Triangle: metaphorically *the self, the organisation and the school*.

### 3.3 Features of VPL

Some features of VPL are already in place or in the process of starting up:

#### ➤ *Terminology and supply-driven character of VPL*

The common term for VPL in the Netherlands is APL, while in Finland the term RPL is used. Both terms highlight the supply-driven character of the VPL-process.

The explanation for this is that in the development-process of VPL the first and easiest way in both countries to set up an integral VPL-system is by top-down 'stimulating' the education and training-sectors to fill in APL- or RPL-procedures using the existing qualification standards. In this way the first step aimed at making the learning system itself VPL-friendly. Since that step is almost finalised, the focus can now be on the individual ownership of the process and on the more formative outcomes of VPL-procedures in the competence management-systems on the labour market.

#### ➤ *On the role of qualifications*

In Finland and the Netherlands the role of RPL or APL is in general a summative one. The stimulus for applying RPL/APL – and therefore turning APL or RPL into VPL - isn't so much the goal of certification but more the goal of enriching one's portfolio for the sake of empowerment and employability. This is reflected in the growing appreciation of VPL as a means to set up personal development schemes.

#### ➤ *Currency of qualifications*

In both countries there is a national standard for VET and Higher Vocational Education (HE). RPL/APL is not so much (yet) used to bridge the gap between the systems of education and human resource management (HRM) on the basis of translating prior learning into mutually recognizable qualifications. Therefore RPL/APL – and again as it is changing into VPL - is very slowly building up continuing education on top of initial VET and HE.

In the Netherlands the report as an outcome of an APL-procedure, is promoted as having 'civil effect'. However, 'civil effect' can only be given by a certifying body or school. Moreover, there is a strong awareness that this might lead to double currencies of qualifications will have negative effects because the status of formally acquired diploma's is very strong; so, acquired diploma's on the basis of non-formal or informal learning outcomes might be stigmatized as less valuable.

#### ➤ *Labour market developments*

labour market developments with possible effects on VPL:

- a shift is occurring from internal firm-mobility (lifetime employment) to intra-sectoral (building sector) and even inter-sectoral mobility (education),

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

➤ *On Quality*

One of the developments in APL in the Netherlands has been the development of a *quality code*, signed in 2006 by all stakeholders. The code was set up with the following goals in mind: to make APL more transparent; to make clear what APL entails; to show how APL should be offered. The code safeguards the quality of APL through an evaluation procedure of APL-providers. When APL-providers receive a positive evaluation they are accredited as APL-provider. In practice however this quality code works as a restrictive force because it draws too much attention to summative effects, it prohibits pro-active development of VPL and strengthens the dominance of a supply-driven VPL-system. Such a strong focus on quality-assurance endangers the free development of VPL-systematics, especially when it comes to raising awareness that VPL is more something for and of the individual citizen.

➤ *Consensus*

In the Netherlands the consensus on the macro-level is very strong. Government and social partners already in 2000 concluded that APL was one of the main solutions encountering the needs of the knowledge society. This consensus looks very much the same in Finland with the ways of working in the tripartite working groups and committees.

A lot of the obstacles to implementation on sectoral, regional and even organisation (schools and firms) levels are still very strong. Fear of poaching, a run on higher wages and losing a position on the 'learning market' as a provider are the main arguments against using RPL/APL. Practice however shows that the profits are bigger than the fears. RPL/APL effectively reduces non-necessary learning and therefore leads to a higher output of learning itself. The bigger problem is to convince the individual learner to invest in him/herself, his/her organisation to set up competence-driven human resource management and to make the learning system offer flexible and work-based learning paths.

## 4. VPL-powered lifelong learning strategies

VPL is strongly development-oriented and intended to recognise and to value both visible and invisible skills of people. It is not focused on highlighting the lack of knowledge and skills but precisely the opposite – to take stock of existing knowledge and skills: in other words, rather than being half empty, Valuation of Prior Learning takes the view that someone’s glass is half filled. VPL can support a variety of lifelong learning-strategies.

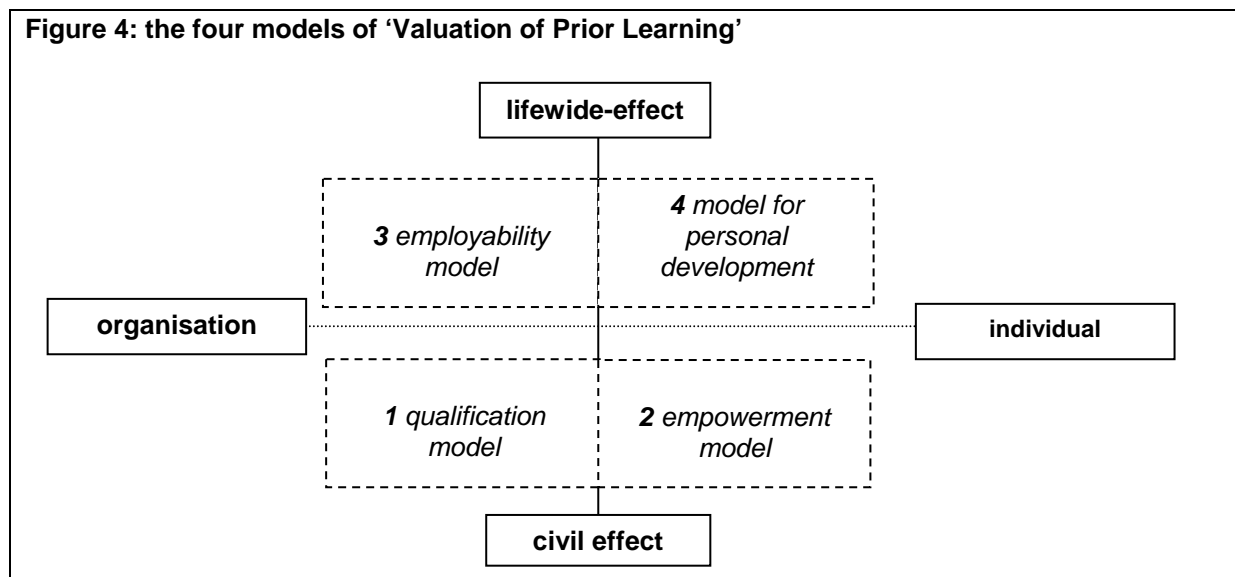
### 4.1 Four models of VPL

In order to broaden the scope of *the European Guidelines* for the sake of implementation of VPL in different societal development-processes, it is useful to describe four generic models in which the diversity of the implementation of VPL in the learning triangle can come to effect:

1. VPL as a *qualification model* for initiating a particular certification or full qualification;
2. VPL as an *empowerment model* for determining learning needs of organisations or individuals;
3. VPL as an *employability model* for matching employees’ competences to organisational aims;
4. VPL as a *model for personal development*.

The first two models are supportive of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> model instead of a goal in itself. Qualification and empowerment are vital for the development of people but are in general more a prerequisite for being, staying or becoming an active member of society. The most important link in the learning triangle is in combining the organisational goals for investing in people in model 3 and personal goals in model 4, i.e. linking the organisation and the individual with VPL. Supportive structures in society, i.e. the learning-system (education and training in model 1) and empowerment-system (model 2 with the sector for career- and job-opportunities like labour and job-agencies, community-programmes for targetgroups, etc.) are the third party in the learning triangle.

Within these models various procedures for VPL are implemented. Three steps can always be distinguished: identifying competences and raising awareness (recognition), assessing and accrediting competences (accreditation) and planning new learning activities (personal development). Possible implications of these procedures are promoting personal self-management of competences and personal development activities. Apart from building bridges between informal, non-formal and formal learning and between the learning system and the labour market VPL operates as a bridge between learners and the learning system.



The structuring of the four models is based on *the objective* (what is the expected effect and which reference framework or benchmark is applied?) and *the context* (in what way is the VPL-process



steered by the organisation or by the individual?). Interpreting these two lines as a pair of axes, gives us four fields in which VPL can be used to serve a particular goal within a particular context: the four models of VPL. Below the horizontal line the supportive models, aiming at qualification and empowerment, are situated for the two models in which VPL opens up the opportunities for people and organisations in the Learning Society, aiming at employability and personal development. The degree in which the individual already is taking part as a co-maker in the VPL-process makes clear to which degree 'the self as the primary change agent in the learning Society' already is involved.

A short typology of the four models:

1. *VPL as a bridge between Vocational Education & Training (VET) and Higher Education (HE) and the labour market: the qualification model*

The function of VPL in this model is aiming primarily at providing qualification on the levels of VET and HE. The two most important forms in which this model occurs:

- Traditional exemption policy based on previously acquired qualifications, which looks only at prior formal education and the relevant certificates;
- Exemption policy based on broader evidence; competences acquired non-formally or informally are also assessed.

A proper quality of the qualification is the primary benchmark, as it must be *recognized* and *accredited* on the responsibility of the provider (the qualifying educational institution). The goals that applicants aim to achieve by obtaining qualifications, and whether qualification is the best way to reach these goals, are not the provider's primary concern. In this model, the provider supplies a good quality product: qualifications and diplomas for competences acquired elsewhere.

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

This model works with school-steered VPL-procedures in which the individual only has to provide a dossier/portfolio. There is only a very limited amount of co-makingship available for candidates.

2. *VPL as model for acquisition of initial qualifications: the empowerment model*

VPL in this model focuses on the contribution made by accreditation and certification to obtaining or retaining a road to employment or another form of social participation or to direct employment.

Forms that occur in this sphere are:

- Recognition and accreditation of competences that have been acquired (formally and informally) in the context of the occupation pursued by the candidate. The procedure and tools used are tailored as far as possible to the individual work environment.
- Recognition and accreditation of competences that have been acquired (formally and informally) in the context of the occupation that the candidate intends to maintain or pursue.

VPL is tailored to the potential for deploying a specific career or employment of the candidate. This can only be built up on the basis of personal empowerment: 'I didn't know I was able to master this kind of career', 'I just couldn't sense my potential', 'I didn't value myself so much before this empowerment-training'. So, it's up to the individual or the candidate himself to get a grip on their personal competencies and value them. The competences in his/her specific context are tailored to the specific objective of the candidate. Obtaining initial qualifications in an effective and efficient way is at the heart of this model: only the necessary training – if needs be – has to be formulated. Providers select and design the way in which the whole process is shaped, and within that process educational institutes act as suppliers of all or part of the services. Development is provided by offering customized forms of both formal learning and informal learning as well as career-advice. This model offers more co-makingship to the individual than the first model. VPL can be offered by schools and/or public and private job supporting agencies.

3. *VPL as model for upgrading competences within any structured context: the employability model*

In this model VPL is aiming primarily at the validation of competences (provision of diplomas, qualifications or partial certificates) outside the context of VET/HE or building further on an already acquired VET/HE-level for reasons of updating or upgrading.

People acquire competences that cannot always be related to existing VET/HE-qualifications in a variety of ways, in formal and informal learning and/or in work situations. Sectoral training



institutes, company schools and voluntary organizations with a high professional content (sports associations etc.) are examples of organisations (or providers) that work with validation of competences based on other standards.

The aim of VPL in this model is to upgrade individuals within their specific context in order to keep them employable and provide them with concrete career opportunities. The provider supplies a good quality product: certificates and diplomas for competences acquired elsewhere. Personal development is offered by providing validation and learning at the workplace.

#### 4. VPL as a model for personal development

The fourth model may be viewed as the integrated model within which the other three spheres are subsumed. Personal development outlines the situation of members of our society who are engaged in a process of self-development in line with their own development requirements on the one hand and the demands of their environment on the other. This model shows the learning individual who is developing himself or herself continuously and in that process makes use of the facilities provided for the valuing the competences that he or she has acquired personally or professionally. He/she might also use them to make it clear what he or she has to offer to employment organizations and other collaborative efforts.

The many forms in which this model emerges are offered by providers (employment organizations, head-hunters for senior posts, employability coaching) who guide individuals in the development of their portfolios. Where necessary, teachers and trainers act to certify competences.

The characteristic feature is that the development programme is determined and controlled by the person in question. While institutions facilitate and provide support, they do not set the direction.

#### 4.2 Examples of Valuation of Prior Learning

A few examples of the actual use of VPL in the Netherlands and Nordic countries gives evidence of the multi-faced character of VPL-systematics. These examples show the diversity of goals, target groups and contexts that VPL as an organising principle is able to manage with respect to the diversity of countries, regions, sectors, organisations, target groups and – even – learning cultures. Moreover, they show there is more to VPL than merely the 'routes from learning to certification'.

##### *The Netherlands*

The project *Hidden talents* in Rotterdam, the Netherlands (VPL2-case studies 2006, NL17) is an example of the Empowerment model.

"What someone's abilities already are isn't interesting. Just looking at the yet unknown is the real learning ground." This is the statement of a training trajectory aimed at emancipating and empowering its participants, namely "Hidden Talents" in Rotterdam.

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

One of the causes for this is that these people in one way or another were not able to face the learning system in compulsory education. Most of them never finished their initial education. So they didn't have a starting qualification with which they would have been able to enter the labour market properly. The procedure itself doesn't differ so much from 'ordinary' validation-procedures; that means always following the triptych of portfolio – assessment - personal development plan. The crucial difference, and probably also the key for its success, is the attention to individual guidance and the support they get from each other, their 'colleagues'.

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

employability is based on their empowerment by making learning for them a matter of enjoyability: learning in their own time, speed, level, environment and using their already acquired competences through non-formal learning. So, in this case both supportive models 1 and 2 were very helpful in bringing about a formative effect for the targetgroup. Their employability was at stake and with the assistance of a VPL-powered approach even their personal development was valued and stimulated.

Finland 

In Finland, *Koskisen Oy* has been developing training and assessment methods in order to recognise and, at the same time, broaden the skill levels of its employees since the early nineties. Their initiative has not only benefited the employees and the company itself but it has had a wider impact on the industry sector. This is a case (Ecotec 2007) that shows how the Employability model works in practice. This is absolutely the case for the company itself. For the employees, employability was their primary target to be reached with the assistance of qualifications. But in the end, it turned out to be more a kind of an empowerment strategy for the employees since VPL helped them to learn and work on the basis of their own strengths and talents.

*Koskisen Oy* is a manufacturing company in the field of wood production. During the past 10 years some 400 employees (approx. 37% of all employees) have been able to validate the skills and the learning they have acquired at work and have obtained an official qualification.

The company offers 'in-house' training, which together with work experience provides employees with an opportunity to attain one of a range of nationally recognised competence-based qualifications (e.g. various wood production and management qualifications).

The skills are assessed by a team that consists of an external assessor and employer and employee representatives. The assessment is made up of practical and written skills tests. All the participants are required to possess 1-2 years of work experience.

The validation and certification has had significant individual, company and industry level effects, both for the employees as well as for the company.

Individual benefits (employees):

- a. improved self-confidence.
- b. broadened and improved skill-base.
- c. greater understanding and adoption of work processes and tasks.
- d. opportunities for higher pay and grants.

Benefits to the company:

- Multi-skilled, motivated, committed, adaptable employees.
- The company has succeeded to transform itself from a basic manufacturing enterprise into a high value-added production company – the highly skilled workforce has been the fundamental base.
- Transformation towards a team-working culture – staff members increasingly work together and are able to replace one another during absences.
- Move towards a more equal, less hierarchical employee structure due to increased skill levels and awareness of these.
- National level recognition for its human resources policies.
- Excellent working environment and low staff turnover levels (turnover levels have reduced by 35% in ten years [which is likely to be linked to the individual benefits mentioned above]).
- A number of national certificates / awards (e.g. award for good employer, best apprenticeship scheme provider of the year, best place to work 2004 'Suomen parhaat työnantajat 2004' - 2<sup>nd</sup> position and the only awarded manufacturing company)
- In spite of the major role of education and training, the productivity levels have always remained high. During the early training periods, the productivity of each participating employee slightly falls but in the longer term significantly improves as a result of new skills and motivation.

Wider effects of this case were the help it gave to raise the status and credibility of the wood production industry. The largest companies in the same industry (e.g. Stora Enso, UPM) have also introduced similar procedures.



### Sweden

In many Swedish industrial kitchen workplaces, as in the case of the University Hospital nutritional unit from the Örebro County Council, there is a lot of staff working without formal vocational education. The employers and the trade unions wanted education within the field from new employees, and this put a pressure on those who were already employed to have their knowledge documented and get proper qualifications in order to stay employable. This casestudy was the winner of the 1<sup>st</sup> European VPL-prize 2007. (VPL2-case studies 2006, SE02)

The target group of this VPL-project consisted of persons without formal education who have been working for a long time in industrial kitchens. In this case the VPL-process of Marie and Inger was described. Their foreman contacted a guidance counsellor at the *CityAkademin* learning centre. After mapping and self-assessment the guidance counsellor contacted vocational teachers at *Virginska skolan* and they carried out the validation.

The case of Marie and Inger is exemplary for the sector. Both women, 45 and 47 years old, already worked for 25 years and are still working within the nutritional unit of the University Hospital in Örebro. One of them has a two-year upper secondary education directed towards office work, a 27-year-old basic course in industrial kitchen work and four additional courses within the same field, the longest lasting two weeks. The other one has a two-year course in general subjects in upper secondary, an interrupted information education from college and two industrial kitchen courses, the longest lasting two weeks.

They wanted to be validated against relevant courses within upper secondary vocational education. As they both have long experience from working life they expected, with a pass mark, to be able to be validated against the course goals of five national courses. Industrial kitchen, food hygiene, foodstuffs A, foodstuffs B and nutritional science. Two vocational subject teachers from one of the upper secondary schools of the municipality carried out the validation.

The subsequent steps in the valuation process were:

1. The employer at the University Hospital nutritional unit contacted *CityAkademin* and asked for Inger and Marie to be given information about guidance counselling and validation. If there was a possibility they wanted to be validated against the industrial kitchen programme.
2. Together with a guidance counsellor a mapping was made and Inger and Marie also got through self-assessment against the course goals.
3. The teacher validated Inger's and Marie's competence through probing interviews, assignments, workplace visits and more.
4. Inger and Marie each received a collective certification document (official document) with the highest marks in five national courses.
5. Inger and Marie now have better possibilities of applying for other employment, they may get better pay and they may apply for further education in the field

The benefits of this project were:

- For the initiator: the employer now knows which capacities the personnel in reality has when compared with a national education. This information can be implemented in the human resources management and shape pro-active training goals for the staff in the organisation. Furthermore the competence management of the organisation can be better adjusted to the needs of the personnel; professionalising the staff in a more effective way on the basis of their already acquired competences and building upon this opens up new changes for attracting new staff as well as upgrading the existing staff.
- For the target group: since Inger and Marie could document and prove their competence on a formal recognised level they may get higher salaries, they will have better possibilities of getting new employment and they will have a basic education on which to build on if they would like further education in the same field.
- For the organisation: The workplace will benefit from having formally competent personnel. The workplace can more efficiently take care of the total competence within the personnel and adjust competence development to needs among the employees.

- On sectoral or national level: there are a large number of persons within industrial kitchens and large-scale households who have an outdated education or no education at all. If persons have the possibility to have their competence validated, the level of competence will be raised at a lower cost than when the persons have to take the complete education-programme.



#### Denmark

A Danish case study focused on the Knowledge Centre Mid-West (Ecotec 2007b). The main focus of this Centre was to bring competence assessment into real life conditions and assess skills and competences in the workplace, where the competences can be demonstrated and where they are normally used. The main reasons for such a choice were: the fact that the vast majority of the target group (immigrants) did not have any previous work experience and the view that the best way to assess a person's skills was to do that in the workplace. Moreover, since most of the immigrants did not have any previous education, assessment by educational institutions was not considered to be as relevant as an assessment by companies. In this sense this is a case in which the Employability model is very functional with both the Qualification as well as the Empowerment model supporting the success of VPL for the targetgroup.

The unemployed immigrants are supported by consultants at the job centers for a workplace competence assessment. After the assessment period is finished, the immigrant is issued with a 'competence card' which describes actual competences as they are observed. The competence card can be used as a recommendation when looking for another job (or being recommended by a job consultant to on -the-job training).

Assessment, through observation, is carried out in the workplace by a mentor. The process is facilitated by an online tool, which specifies which skills and competences are to be assessed for a particular job. The tool contains descriptions for each job and specifies the range of skills that ensure proper execution of tasks envisaged by a given job function. The development of standards was based on the existing national occupational standards. However, the process of constructing job descriptions went further by breaking down the skills and competences into functions.

During the three to four week assessment period, personal competences, professional, language, computer and basic skills are assessed in relation to the tasks performed. The reasons for prioritizing these competences was the fact that the employers often perceive immigrant workers as lacking key personal competences needed in a Danish workplace.

Due to the initial low or no level of education of the target groups, the types of jobs that are performed are those corresponding to an unskilled labourer level, such as cleaner. In some cases, the skills acquired can correspond to qualification levels and are usually complemented by vocational training in an education institution. Whenever the qualification serves the purpose of getting a person into employment, this option is chosen. This is especially relevant to the social services sector where the demand for labour, especially at lower skill levels, is high and offers a very effective bridge into employment for immigrants.

During the assessment period the employers can be compensated with a wage subsidy for a learner. In many cases learners are offered further training in the company, where companies can benefit from training subsidies and a learner is paid a minimum wage for their work.

The system is also useful for other target groups which lack proper professional experience. It receives considerable support from employers who are, first of all keen to take on new trainees and secondly, satisfied with the new standardized tools that minimize their time spent on giving feedback while at the same time allowing for comparability of the assessment results.

#### 4.3 Benchmarking the cases

These different national examples show that large groups from very different contexts and with different objectives can benefit from VPL within different models. The bottleneck for making use of VPL is less the knowledge infrastructure or organizations and more the individual's unfamiliarity with VPL. This means that it is primarily the transition to individual empowerment that is causing the present underutilization of Valuing Prior Learning as a gateway to employability and lifelong learning strategies of social partners and schools/institutes. Additionally, the examples show that the reason for this does not by definition lie in authority relationships. The individual is given in many cases adequate

leeway to arrange a personal track with the individual learning biography, even if that lies outside the individual's own professional column.

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

When trying to plot the four country-cases into the model the diversity become visible. In order to make a proper comparison, every VPL-model scores on two variables. The scores of the case within the variables is decided on the basis of six indicators that cover the integral VPL-process (Calonder & Schuur 2007). These indicators form the basis for a benchmark-tool of case studies as well as a line-up for a charter that covers the commitment of people and organisations (for the Charter see chapter 6.4).

The more indicators are present and developed, the higher the score in the variables:

- i. Awareness (cultural literacy): degree of ... encouragement of self-awareness, ... strengthening self-identity, ... widening self-responsibility, ... promoting problem solving,... enhancing (integral) working with others,
- ii. Holistic approach: degree of ... including all areas of life, ... interrelating all sectors of education, ... facilitating access to labour market, ... respecting evidence of all areas and ways of learning, ... promoting modular learning, ... focusing on individual interests,
- iii. Responsibilities: degree of ... clarifying the roles of the persons and decision makers involved, ... separating between the tasks of guiding and assessing/validating, ... promoting common understanding between bottom-up and top-down experts, ... assuring protection of relevant data, ... including accompanying tools, ... granting process-oriented instruments to assure sustainability,
- iv. Personal development and mobility: degree of ... contributing to the development of self-confidence, ... contributing to taking an active role in personal development, ...promoting the steering of career-goals on a long-term basis, ... promoting approaches to occupational goals which match the personal reality, ... improving personality building and participation in the learning society,
- v. Procedures for VPL: degree of ... including all personal records of achievement for providing evidence, ... encouraging the application of folders of evidence (portfolios), ... accepting folders of evidence for formative ways of accreditation, ... accepting folders evidence for summative ways of accreditation,
- vi. Standards and quality: degree of ... assuring information about the different ways of accreditation, ... relating to values of an overarching system of recognition and validation, ... granting appropriate structures, ... assuring a system of quality control.

Together these indicators for benchmarking case studies define the principles for an open and flexible system of competence-based formal and informal learning, create specific processes, procedures and supporting actions to guarantee access and quality and set up a frame of reference for the application of VPL. When using these indicators the national cases can be ranked in the matrix with their possible scores for the subsequent 'VPL-angles' as follows:

The horizontal line on the context of the case

0. VPL not present, no access or not developed
1. VPL developing
2. VPL developing and partly in operation
3. VPL present, accessible and developed



4. VPL fully operational, pilot-phase
5. VPL structurally anchored

The vertical line on the goal(s) and effect(s) of the case:

- a. strong 'formal' civil effect
- b. broad civil effect and weak lifewide effect
- c. broad civil effect and mild lifewide effect
- d. broad lifewide effect with civil support
- e. strong lifewide effect, structurally embedded, incl. civil effect

#### 4.4 Ranking the cases

Using the six indicators to fill in the score for the four cases on the horizontal and vertical lines can on the basis of the information provided for the cases only lead to a 'rough' or general ranking. For proper ranking at least 20% of the involved individuals (VPL-candidates, employers and VPL-professionals) should have been interviewed. In this context a general ranking on the basis of the overall description of the cases meets the ends of this article, i.e. putting the individual learner at the heart of the VPL-process and arranging the learning triangle with interconnected co-makship of the individual learner, the employer and the teacher as, metaphorically, the three main players in the VPL-game. In figure 5 the four country-cases are ranked according to the six indicators.

**Figure 5: case-analysis VPL-models**

	NL	FIN	S	DK
1. qualification	3 b	2d	4c	3c
2. empowerment	2 c	2d	3c	3c
<b>Averages models 1 &amp; 2</b>	<b>1q + bc</b>	<b>0 + d</b>	<b>1q + c</b>	<b>0 + c</b>
<b>3. employability</b>	<b>3 b</b>	<b>4c</b>	<b>2b</b>	<b>1b</b>
<b>4. personal development</b>	<b>2 b</b>	<b>3c</b>	<b>2c</b>	<b>2c</b>

When drawn in the model the scores for model 1 and 2 are put together to present the 'infrastructural' point in the learning triangle. The other two points, necessary to draw the triangle, are made up of the scores of models 3 and 4.

This general analysis of the four cases is of course very limited in scope. For an in-depth analysis one should have more information on the individuals involved, their goals, specific contexts and the effects on them. The same goes for the employer's and teacher's or assessor's view. Nevertheless, the general analysis makes clear that the development and implementation of VPL from the perspective of an organisational context is stronger than in a personalised context. More attention should be given to personalising VPL.

The two supportive models (qualification and empowerment) are already better developed when it comes to civil effect as an impulse for lifelong learning; especially the qualification-model is developed with the empowerment-model gaining ground quickly, when target groups see that they can obtain civil effect on the basis of their prior learning. The qualification-model offers at this moment a faster and more concrete result.

The same goes for the overall score in effects; the scores of VPL-usage in formal learning standards are much better than the scores in lifewide development or broad lifelong learning-strategies that also incorporate formal, informal and non-formal learning.

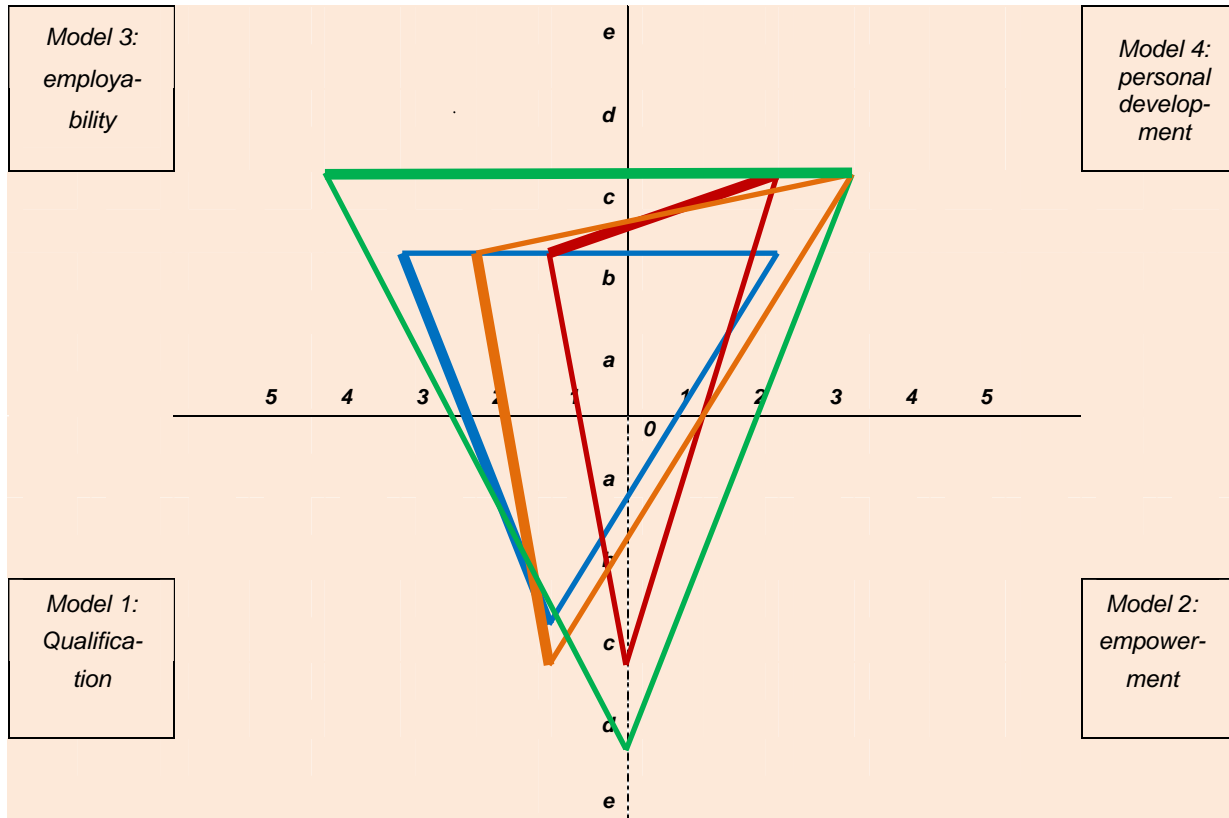
The dominant relation in the 'triangle' is for the Danish and the Finnish case the relation between employers and targetgroup of individual learner and for the Dutch and Swedish casethe relation between employers and 'schools'.


Overall one could say that the Finnish case is showing the most 'balanced' and developed status of VPL as a basis for lifelong learning-strategies for people and organisations.

In Figure 6 these four country-cases are put together in one diagram.



**Figure 6: analysis grid country-cases VPL**



- NL = 
- FIN = 
- S = 
- DK = 

## 5. VPL as a personal approach

A VPL procedure in general consists of five phases: commitment and awareness of the value of one's competencies, recognition of personal competencies, valuation and/or validation of these competencies, (advice on the) development of one's competencies and finally structurally embedding this competence-based development process into a personal or organisation steered and owned policy (Duvekot 2006). Together these five phases constitute the VPL-process.

### 5.1 The VPL-procedure in 5 phases

The five phases of VPL:

#### *Phase 1: Commitment and awareness*

An individual has to be aware of his/her own competencies; of the value, he/she is giving him/herself to these competencies and the value it has for others in certain contexts at certain moments. Being able to keep up your competencies in a 'made-to-measure way' is vital for this understanding. For organisations, it is vital to understand that investing in people means investing in the goals of the own organisation. This awareness should culminate in setting specific targets for the investment in individuals and the support the organisation can give to this *human resource development*. This phase consists of two steps: raising awareness and setting the targets for VPL within the context of the organisation. This phase is the real critical success factor for VPL since if an organisation doesn't experience the necessity to think or rethink its mission and connect the results of this to the need to strengthen or even start up a pro-active form of human resource management. In other words, it takes a lot of effort to see the benefits of lifelong learning on the level of an organisation and activate these benefits by supporting an individual VPL-process. In general, this phase takes as much time as the other four phases together!

#### *Phase 2: Recognition*

Identifying or listing competencies is usually done with the help of a portfolio. Apart from a description of work experience and diplomas, the portfolio is filled with other evidence of competencies acquired. Statements from employers, references, papers or photos undeniably show the existence of certain competencies. The evidence can be aimed at the profession or position the VPL procedure is developed for. In other cases it can be an 'open' portfolio or a complete overview. Evidence is sometimes aimed at valuation, in other cases at personal profiling. The participant compiles the portfolio him/herself, with or without help. This phase is made up of a preparatory and a retrospective step. The preparation aims at articulating the actual need for competencies in the organisation in the different function-profiles. In the retrospective step, the involved individuals fill in their portfolios and acquire the necessary proof of their learning in the (recent) past.

#### *Phase 3: the valuation or assessment of competencies*

Then the content of the portfolio is being valued or assessed, when necessary, followed by an extra assessment. With employees, this usually takes place by observation during work or by means of a criterion based interview. Assessors compare the competencies of an individual with the standard used in the involved organisation. That standard will be used to measure the qualities of the participant. The path followed is unimportant, only the result counts. This second step results in a certain valuation: a validation on an organisational, sector or national level in the form of certificates, diplomas or career moves, or a valuation in the form of an advice on career-opportunities.

This phase therefore needs different steps:

- Setting the standard of the specific VPL - process. This standard can in principal be any standard that meets the need of the organisation, e.g. a national or sector vocational standard or an internal standard. Together with the standard a choice can be made of the way the assessment will take place;
- The valuation itself, being the assessment of the portfolio and valuing it with correspondence to the given standard and targets of the organisation;
- The validation of the learning evidence within the given standard.

After this phase, the retrospective part of the VPL-process is concluded. The next phases concentrate on the prospective power of VPL.

#### *Phase 4: the development plan*

This phase of the VPL procedure aims at the development of the individual by turning the validation and/or advice into an action plan. On the basis of the valued competencies and clarity about the missing competencies or available strong competencies, a personal development plan is made up. This plan is about learning activities that will be done in formal or non-formal learning environments, in work situations, during a change of position, by offering coaching or by creating an environment in which informal learning is stimulated.

This phase has two steps. First, a match should be made between the individual's development plan and the goals of the organisation. This match could be made by simply stating that any kind of individual learning is also for the benefit of the organisation. Mostly, however, the match will be agreed upon by making the personal development plan a formal part of the broader organisation plan. Secondly, the actual learning or development of the individual will be started up. In this step, the individual learns/develops his or herself on a 'made-to-measure basis', which means learning/developing irrespective and independent of form, time, place and environment.

#### *Phase 5: structural implementation of VPL*

The last phase of the VPL-process focuses at the structural implementation of VPL in the training and personnel policy of an organisation. The results of a VPL-pilot have to be evaluated in order to show the way the implementation can take place on a 'made-to-measure basis'. An organisation should be able to use VPL structurally for the specific goals that had been set in the pilot. Any new goals should also be added easily to this new policy.

This phase has one step: evaluating and embedding the results of the VPL-pilot in the human resource management (HRM) of the organisation. By doing this the organisation will turn its existing training and personnel policy into a competence-based lifelong learning policy in which learning made to measure is the cornerstone of its HRM. The positive benefits of VPL can come to full bloom in this phase.

### **5.2 Towards a personalised VPL**

VPL offers a personal development-strategy in which the organisation-context and public/private services are crucial for keeping up with the speed of competence-development in the knowledge-society. On the individual level this calls for filling in the five phases of the VPL-process in ten steps. The steps to be taken are shown in figure 7, including the relevant questions in each step.

<b>Figure 7: The process of 'Valuation of Prior Learning'</b>		
<b>Phase</b>	<b>Step + question</b>	<b>Action individual</b>
<b>I. Preparation</b>	<b>1. awareness</b> <i>Which necessity is there for self-investment?</i>	Being accessible to lifelong learning Inventory of personal learning wishes Start self-management of competences
	<b>2. setting targets</b> <i>Which learning targets are relevant?</i>	Self-assessment SWOT-analysis Formulate learning targets
<b>II. Recognition</b>	<b>3. setting a personal profile</b> <i>how to determine the need for competences?</i>	Writing a personal profile Choosing a portfolio-format
	<b>4. retrospection</b> <i>how to describe and document learning outcomes/prior learning?</i>	Filling in a portfolio if needed, portfolio-guidance

III. Valuation & Validation	5. <b>standard setting</b> <i>what is the relevant standard related to the targets?</i>	Choosing a standard Re-arranging the personal portfolio self-assessment inventory of career-opportunities
	6. <b>valuation</b> <i>How to get valued?</i>	Valuation of the portfolio getting advice on certification- and career opportunities
	7. <b>validation</b> <i>How to get validated?</i>	Turning the advice into proper certification and career-evaluation
IV. Development	8. <b>prospection</b> <i>How to set up a personal development plan (PDP)?</i>	Turning validation into a PDP for reasons of certification, employability, empowerment Arranging learning-made-to-measure
	9. <b>implementing a PDP</b> <i>Working on learning targets</i>	Execute PDP
V. Implementation	10. <b>Structural implementation &amp; empowerment</b> <i>How did it go? If ok, how to embed VPL structurally in a personal lifelong learning strategy?</i>	evaluation of the process maintaining portfolio-documentation

Source: Duvekot, 2006.

In figure 7 a few elements are crucial:

1. **Raising awareness** of the necessity and opportunities of lifelong learning for individuals in any given context is the heart of the process of Valuing Learning. Without this learning will remain school- or company-steered and cannot effectively be based on individual motivation and ambition.
2. In Phase II **the portfolio** is introduced as the red thread in the process. After learning targets have been set, the portfolio is designed and filled; its content is assessed and an advice is added on possible qualification- and career-opportunities; it is subsequently enriched by learning-made-to-measure and finally, the starting point of a new process in which new learning targets can be formulated. The portfolio, so to say, is on the one hand both the starting as well as the end point of the individual learning process. On the other hand any end point is again the starting point of a new learning process. This is called the portfolio-loop.
3. In Phase III **Self-assessment** is the crucial element because without this a person can only partially become co-maker of his/her personal development.  
There are different instruments available for this kind of self-assessment, for instance the Swiss CH-Q instrument. (CH-Q = Schweizer Qualificationsbuch; Schuur, et al, 2003). It is an integral system for Valuation of Prior Learning. It consists of a broad package of services: portfolio, (self-) assessment, career-planning, action-planning, quality-control and accompanying training programmes.  
In general tools like CH-Q aim at personal development or career-planning and/or creating flexibility and mobility of the individual learner to and on the labour-market. They create added value by revitalising individual responsibility or co-makship by:
  - providing the basis for a goal-oriented development and career-planning,
  - the stimulation of personal development,
  - the support of self managed learning and acting,
  - stimulating young and adults to document continuously their professional- and personal development.
4. **The role of the assessor** is vital for starting up personal development in any kind of form. Reliable assessment is the *matchmaker* between a portfolio, including a personal action plan, and the specific development steps advised by the assessor. In any given model for Valuing Learning an assessment-policy has three functions: (1) raising levels of achievement, (2) measuring this achievement reliably and (3) organising the assessment cost-effectively.

Assessment in this broad context is the judgement of evidence submitted for a specific purpose; it is therefore an act of measurement. It requires two things: evidence and a standard scale. (Ecclestone, 1994). Evidence is provided with the portfolio (or showcase) of the candidate. The standard that will be met, depends on the specific objective of the candidate. This means that the role of the assessor is all the more crucial because this professional has to be flexible with regard to the many objectives in order to be able to provide a custom-oriented validation and/or valuation. On top of that the professional should be able to use dialogue-based assessment forms. On the basis of the advice of such an assessor further steps for personal development will be set in motion.

The choice of a certain assessor role therefore largely depends on the objective of the assessment, which can vary greatly. Assessments for formal recognition of competences with certificates or exemptions for accredited training programmes demand the involvement of an assessor from an institution offering competence-based accreditation and adequate measures to guarantee the quality of the assessor. Assessments for accrediting competences at the company or institution level or merely to acquire insight into someone's competences do not require the involvement of an institution offering competence-based certification. In these cases, the assessor is also often a colleague, supervisor or the individual himself.

In order to guarantee good 'quality' of the assessor on the one hand and prevent a new qualitycontrol-bureaucracy on the other hand, it is recommended to formulate a 'quality-light' procedure for Validation-procedures. A further advantage of a 'quality-light' procedure is that it is highly cost-effective and therefore very accessible to candidates. Possibilities for organising 'quality-light' are:

- any assessor should first design and fill in his/her own portfolio and personal actionplan; only then they can be given entrance to assessor-trainings,
  - a professional register for assessors should guarantee their competences and professionalism,
  - every two years a new assessor accreditation should guarantee professionalism by ensuring assessor quality. Assessor quality can be maintained by means of refresher and updating courses. This new accreditation could be carried out by an official national agency, and tripartite governing (authorities and social partners),
  - quality of assessors implies being able to refer to a standard for assessors: this standard is developed in many EU-projects and already available; it only needs a European frame and national application.
5. Regarding the **development-steps** one might say that, when following the personalized path of VPL, the ten fundamental principles underpinning validation are not only respected but also used in an integral way. Activating the guidelines in the context of the learning triangle means that the guidelines are extended to a wider range of routes, not only from learning to certification but also from learning to empowerment and employability. This calls for a strong involvement of the different stakeholders as formulated in principle 4. Stakeholders that are involved in establishing systems for validation should not only be 'educationalists' but also social partners. Principle 4 calls for a clear responsibility of not only certification-systems but also from human resource systems.
  6. Proper **evaluation** and **feedback** finally is necessary to structurally embed the process into personal behaviour.

## 6. A final word

The aim of this contribution was to show the road to implementation of VPL in any given context by aiming at the individual learner's perspective and an integral use of VPL-powered learning-processes. By introducing the concept of the learning triangle and its four models for implementation of VPL in different societal development-processes, the scope of *the European Guidelines* was broadened.

### 6.1 Conclusions

VPL means that organisations acquire a clear picture of their competency demands and requirements, work on the formulation of their demands, and invest in their 'human capital'.

For the learning system VPL means acting as a 'listening' partner, initiating and offering VPL *and* custom work. The employee (or job-seeker) has to be prepared to explore, identify and develop his or her personal competencies so that he or she can work proactively on enhanced employability and further career development. VPL and custom work are outstanding tools with which the individual can attain this enhancement.

One of the starting points of this article was the focus on the learning individual and the way to activate this 'third' party in the Learning triangle of *individual-organisation-school*. In order to be able to recognise the developments regarding VPL within the transitional society and within the variety of goals and contexts more clearly, four different VPL-steered models for lifelong learning strategies were introduced.

On the basis of these models the following general conclusions can be drawn:

1. VPL has everything to do with the use of the possibilities that lifelong learning has to offer individuals and organisations in the fields of employability and empowerment. Organising the 'Learning Triangle' is a crucial part in this:
  - a. the learning individual is in charge of putting together and maintaining the portfolio. The portfolio is the basis for the formation of a lifelong learning strategy;
  - b. the learning organisation is responsible for asking the organisation's competence questions and to facilitate investment in its own *learning* employees;
  - c. the learning facilities (professional education, schooling and training) must be able to respond to the various learning needs of the learning individual, in other words be able to offer educational programmes that have been custom-made both structurally and in content.
2. There is support for the idea that the learner takes a central place in establishing, designing and implementing lifelong learning. This investment in human capital calls for co-makship of the learner him/herself. At all times the principle process here is the process of moving towards the desired learning goals, both when determining an individual's starting situation and during an individual's development course.
3. The portfolio is a powerful way to give structure and content to this co-makship. Guidance from within the labour market organisation could be a welcome push in this direction by offering:
  - a. training in self-management of competencies. This is a useful way to start the formation of the desired portfolio
  - b. help in putting together a portfolio in the work situation. An expert on the subject, easily approachable, who can offer help in designing a portfolio, is of great value in actually realising portfolio formation.
  - c. self-assessment tools, for instance, to help determine the competence and ambition level. This could be of great use in determining goals and direction in lifelong learning.
4. In the light of the different goals needed to make a start in lifelong learning, further research is needed into the motives for and the desired design of lifelong learning strategies. The four models (educational, upgrade, HRD and career models) can then be taken up on the basis of their own dynamics in the Learning Triangle, in which the three actors can deal with varying responsibilities.
5. VPL as a bridge between the individual/organisation and professional education/schooling only becomes relevant when concrete learning questions have been formulated, which then need to be answered by professional education/schooling. The basis for all learning questions is, after all, deciding what the starting situation of the individual is. In addition, on the basis of a specific learning question a lifelong learning trajectory is offered; this could be a diploma trajectory but



could also be enrichment learning in the form of modules, action learning, distance education, work guidance or otherwise.

6. VPL may serve as a bridge between the competence needs of, on the one hand, the organisation and, on the other, the individual. This calls for two forms of VPL:
  - a. Synchronizing competence systems of labour market organisations on the one hand, with their competence management or HRM, and on the other hand schools and institutes, with their competence-focused curricula and training programmes. The goal of this synchronization is to determine which competencies and learning environments can be added to the portfolio; in this way the portfolio of the working individual can be fed and upgraded from within the HRM and the (professional) educational and schooling system. This form of VPL is top-down oriented and strives for a harmony between competence systems in the areas of supply and demand.
  - b. Through this synchronisation the learner can make clearer choices with regards to enriching his/her portfolio. The appreciation and recognition the learning individual seeks (partially dependent on the goals that have been set) can then be supported by two competence systems. VPL can provide concrete indications of what the most appropriate learning route for personal development is. In doing so, they can also make use of the competence acquisition that can be supported from within the own organisation or through external organisations. This form of VPL is bottom-up oriented VPL and looks for the balance between personal development questions and the most appropriate learning content and design.

## 6.2 Recommendations

Various recommendations and issues concerning the further implementation of the integral VPL can be useful in the European area.

### *Phase 1: Preparation and recognition of competencies*

- Concentrating on marketing of VPL is highly important. The individual learner should be addressed especially, because if he/she fails to see the need for learning, there will be no lifelong learning at all!
- Collection of practical VPL-examples from all levels, i.e. on individual, organisational and systemic levels.
- Macro level: more stimulus in legislation, financial arrangements and regulations.
- Educational awareness should be raised in an organisation or company.
- Information provision must be made crystal clear to the individual (employee or job-seeker).
- Self-management of competencies is crucial: in the division of roles between those involved, the emphasis for the individual is on personal process management; for the organisation on the formulation of aims and the accompanying formulation of demands for competency development; and for the educational institution it is on the development of flexible learning-made-to-measure programmes. This step involves the creation of personal portfolio-formats.

### *Phase 2: Recognition of competencies*

- A candidate must work with a clear portfolio(format). Depending on the goal and the context there are three main forms available.
- Training-programmes for self-management of competencies must be offered. Such a training is very helpful in designing, filling and managing one's portfolio.
- Setting standards involves selection of a standard from educational or human resource systems by the candidate dependent on goal & context of VPL.
- The function of guidance should be strengthened, especially in the 'empowerment-model'.
- The accessibility of a chosen standard is extremely important in the candidate's self-management.

### *Phase 3: Valuation and/or Validation of competencies*

- more transparency, uniformity, harmonisation and collaboration at national level.
- match competency systems from organisations and educational systems. VPL is the bridge.
- VPL procedures must take place independent of training-programmes.
- No distinction between diploma's acquired on the basis of formal, informal or non-formal learning.

- VPL should be also possible at Masters level.

#### *Phase 4: Further development of competencies*

- Organisations have to facilitate personal development plans, provide guidance and make the competence management transparent; creating workbased learning situations also helps.
- Education must value the workplace as a rich learning environment.
- Employees need to self-manage their personal development programmes following a VPL procedure. In this sense, learning-made-to-measure means that it is up to them to make choices in the degree of self-determination or external direction within their development. These choices range between 100% self-management of form and content of the programme (*empowering*) and 0% (*pampering*).

#### *Phase 5: Anchoring VPL*

- Organisations must ensure that their formulation of demands is effective. Clear formulation of demands means that there is clarity concerning (1) the competencies that are present within the organisation, and (2) the required competencies within the framework of the organisational aims. 1 and 2 can be combined to ensure the development of (3) the competence demands within the organisation, and ultimately (4), an action plan for the validation and development of available and required competencies.
- Research into the effects of VPL: research is needed into the added value of VPL, among other things focussed on its economic, financial and social effects.
- Integration of VPL in HRM: there must be a better integration of VPL into HR policy and practice, aimed at enhancing employability and mobility, increasing voluntary participation and working towards achievable goals.

### **6.3 Roadmap for further action**

It's evident that more research is needed to make clear how the practical use of *the European Guidelines* in the context of national strategies for VPL-implementation can come to full bloom. Relevant questions are: how to activate the learning triangle by stimulating all actors? which problems and which ambitions can be made transparent? who does what and with what motive? which learning-demand is relevant and with which intended learning outcome? How does life long learning refer to the general framework that authorities and social partners are maintaining?

In answering these questions the general focus should be on:

- a. Use *the European Guidelines* as a starting point for designing a national framework of VPL-systematics that favours the four main VPL-models which all four stimulate different lifelong learning-strategies,
- b. Put the individual learner with her/his portfolio in the position of co-makship,
- c. Focus on learning outcomes instead of learning-input,
- d. The total VPL-process is portfolio-based; i.e. recognition, accreditation and development. So make sure the bottom-up process of RPL is as well organized as the top-down process of APL,
- e. Make sure the standards for qualification and/or competence-management are transparent and interchangeable. The European Qualification Framework offers good reference material to set up levels in standards, both in education and training as well as in human resources management,
- f. Competence-systems (qualification-standards & competence-management) must be linked in order for the individual to take a pick where, how and why to employ and enrich one's portfolio,
- g. Lifelong learning is about stimulating the learning triangle: individual (portfolio-build up), organisation (competence-based HRM) and education (learning-made-to-measure).

By answering these questions a more transparent image can be made of the broad supporting role of VPL for:

1. VPL as an qualification model for initiating a particular diploma-programme;
2. VPL as an empowerment model for determining an individual's educational and training needs for obtaining initial qualifications,

3. VPL as an employability model for matching and upgrading employees' competencies to match organisational aims;
4. VPL as a personal development model for supporting individual career-opportunities.

More knowledge in the actual use of valuation is needed in order to adapt, develop and strengthen the necessary services; for, so much is clear now, VPL connects all stakeholders in lifelong learning strategies! Short-term goals are:

- Stimulating the awareness of the learning individual by offering courses in self-management of competencies & portfolio-build up,
- Helping organisations to articulate their need for competencies and embed this need in pro-active competence-management,
- Making a match between the already articulated demand for competencies on the labour market and the already developed supply of competencies in education/training/guidance,
- Preparing the development of new supply of learning-made-to-measure in order to make better matches with the learning-demand deriving from one of the perspectives of valuation-models

When the roadmap is followed, commitment amongst the stakeholders will develop fully. There will be plenty of space to build strong commitment for new ways of learning both within circles of government, education sector and social partners as well as among the citizens. Commitment after all is the most essential precondition for making use of prior learning assessment and thereby changing the 'looks' of the formal learning system. Commitment means that all parties involved will take up their own responsibility.

Competence-based learning and valuation of prior learning will also make learning more a matter of fun again, since learning will be made more to measure. The motivation of the learners will therefore be higher. For teachers and schools, this will as well be stimulating and inspiring. In this sense one could state that learning will not only be a matter of employability but also of enjoyability!

#### **6.4 Proposal for a VPL-charter**

When implementing *the European Guidelines* it seems that there is more to it than just a set of rules for promoting the use of VPL-systematics. A possible way to strengthen these kind of guidelines could be the formulation of a charter for VPL as a framework, including benchmark-tool, for:

- Defining the principles for an open and flexible system of competence-based formal and informal learning
- Creating specific processes, procedures and supporting actions to guarantee access and quality
- Setting up a frame of reference for the application

This framework is intended to become a Charter that sets out to give a major contribution to realizing a society that empowers individuals to act in a autonomous way (individual success) and to participate and integrate in modern society and in the labour market (success for society). The efforts are concentrating on building a sustainable 'Competence Culture' within an active, permanent and wide dissemination of lifelong learning. Such a charter could sustainably embed the commitment of people and organisations for VPL-powered lifelong learning strategies in their policies and practices.

The driving concept behind developing a Competence Culture with this supporting charter is the recognition that effective valuation arrangements to support individuals in becoming lifelong learners are a need in society. The empowerment of individuals in the face of an increasing pace of change in social and economic systems remains a principal focus of these arrangements. Giving learning processes and its outcome a value is - in this context - summarized by the designation Valuation of Prior Learning. This is where the Charter finds its place.

The Charter intends to give a major contribution to the setting up of a society that empowers individuals to act in a autonomous way (individual success) and to participate and integrate in modern society and in the labour market (success for society). The efforts are concentrating on building a sustainable Competence Culture within an active, permanent and wide dissemination of lifelong learning. This Competence Culture is one of the cornerstones of the Learning Society.

The goals set in the Charter are for a great deal corresponding with *the European Guidelines*. The extra feature of the Charter is that it goes with a benchmark tool as used in chapter 4 when comparing the four country-cases.

- A. Defining the principles for an open and flexible system of competence-based formal and informal learning:
  - 1. Empowering individuals to act autonomously; giving them support to cohere to a greater whole (awareness and cultural literacy)
  - 2. Linking different areas of life; combining education and labour market; connecting bottom-up and top-down strategies (holistic approach)
  - 3. Assuring transparency of roles of the stakeholders; paying attention to bottom-up and top-down interfaces; assuring personality- and data protection; telling apart guidance processes from validation procedures (shared responsibilities, power of control)
- B. Creating specific processes, procedures and supporting actions to guarantee access and quality:
  - 4. Establishing valuation processes enabling individuals to recognise their skills, to manage their potential, to steer their career in order to enhance flexibility and mobility (personal development, integration in society)
  - 5. Establishing validation procedures allowing individuals to submit conclusive evidence of their informal / non-formal learning in order to get formal recognition (summative and formative approaches)
- C. Setting up a frame of reference for the application:
  - 6. Adopting common standards and guiding principles as fundamentals for an overarching system of recognition and validation; setting up structures which reflect the different levels of processes and procedures; defining quality criteria and establishing systems of quality-assurance for the application of procedures and processes (standards, structures, quality assurance)

The Charter is an essential means of preserving individually focussed processes and preventing drift in policy and practices, but still offers flexibility and possibilities to change. It's available to all to make use of it.

## Glossary

Competence	an ability that extends beyond the possession of knowledge and skills. It includes: 1) cognitive competence; 2) functional competence; 3) personal competence; and 4) ethical competence ( <a href="http://www.cedefop.gr">www.cedefop.gr</a> : "EU Knowledge system for lifelong learning")
Informal learning	learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organised or structured (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner's perspective. It typically does not lead to certification. ( <a href="http://www.cedefop.gr">www.cedefop.gr</a> : "EU Knowledge system for lifelong learning")
Knowledge society	a society that creates, shares and uses knowledge for the prosperity and well-being of its citizens. ( <a href="http://www.digitalstrategy.govt.nz/Media-Centre/Glossary-of-Key-Terms">www.digitalstrategy.govt.nz/Media-Centre/Glossary-of-Key-Terms</a> )
Learning outcome	statement of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process, which is defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence. (EU 2008b)
Learning society	a society in which learning is considered important or valuable, where people are encouraged to continue to learn throughout their lives, and where the opportunity to participate in education and training is available to all. ( <a href="http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/training_skills/policy_issues_reviews/key_issues">www.dest.gov.au/sectors/training_skills/policy_issues_reviews/key_issues</a> )
Learning triangle	the playing field for lifelong learning strategies. Its constituent parts are the individual, the organisation and the school with their own respective learning responsibilities: self-management of competencies, competence management and competence-steered curricula. The balance of power is flexible and is dependent on goal and context of learning. (Duvekot 2006)
Lifelong learning	lifelong learning embraces all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills/competences and/or qualifications for personal, social and/or professional reasons. ( <a href="http://www.cedefop.gr">www.cedefop.gr</a> : "EU Knowledge system for lifelong learning")
Non-formal learning	learning which is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support), but which contain an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It normally does not lead to certification. ( <a href="http://www.cedefop.gr">www.cedefop.gr</a> : "EU Knowledge system for lifelong learning")
Validation of learning	the process of assessing and recognising learning, including non-formal and informal learning. Validation usually refers to the process of recognising a wider range of skills and competences than is normally the case within formal certification. ( <a href="http://www.cedefop.gr">www.cedefop.gr</a> : "EU Knowledge system for lifelong learning")
Valuation of Learning	the process of underpinning lifelong learning strategies and the organising principle for designing these strategies. Valuation implies development of individuals, organisations and society, with and without formal validation in working and learning systems. (VPL-network 2004)
Valuation of Prior Learning	the process of promoting participation in and outcomes of (formal or non-formal) learning, in order to raise awareness of its intrinsic worth and to reward learning. ( <a href="http://www.cedefop.gr">www.cedefop.gr</a> : "EU Knowledge system for lifelong learning")

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## The author

Ruud Duvekot (1960) works at *INHOLLAND University* as expert/researcher in the fields of Valuing Prior Learning and Lifelong Learning-strategies.

He also works for the *Empowerment centre EVC* as advisor/researcher. This foundation focuses on developing and implementing national lifelong learning-strategies and VPL-systematics for specific targetgroups: minorities, drop-outs, refugees, unskilled workers, etc..

He chairs the Foundation *European Centre Valuation Prior Learning*. This foundation specializes in research on VPL and the dissemination of results of VPL-projects in Europe.