



# Country report

# Belgium-French

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

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# 1 Introduction and Evaluation

## 1.1 Abstract

In French-speaking Belgium, the system of validation of non-formal and informal learning has undergone important developments since the early 2000s. It is the result of initiatives supported at national level, and it is framed by important pieces of legislation. VNFIL was first developed in adult education (*Enseignement de promotion sociale*: EPS) in 1991, followed in 2003 by the CVET sector, with a focus on individuals with no formal qualifications.

There are now two types of VNFIL in Belgium, the validation of competences (VDC) in the continuous vocational education and training (CVET) sector, leading to the award of a recognised certificate; and, the valorisation of prior experience (VAE-*valorisation des acquis de l'expérience*) in adult education and higher education, leading to the validation of learning units or exemptions from certain parts of a study pathway.

Recent policy strategies confirm that validating non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) is now a key element of employment and education policies. With a new regulatory framework in place since 2014 (Decree on the organisation of higher education), VAE in higher education now has a stronger institutional basis.

Challenges still need to be addressed (in particular, improving the value of the skills certificate on the labour market, and widening the profile of VAE users) but overall the scheme today is considered effective and robust.

## 1.2 Main changes since the 2014 update

In the continuing vocational education and training (CVET) sector, the 'validation of competences' (*validation des compétences*, VDC) aims at recognising the professional knowledge and know-how acquired outside of typical training channels. When successful, the validation procedure leads to the issuing of a *titre de compétence* (Skills Certificate). The definition of validation has not changed since its creation in 2003.

Important developments have taken place since 2014: validation has moved to a consolidation phase. The Consortium in charge of coordinating VDC has set up initiatives to attract new users and make the scheme more appealing to employers (see section 9.4.2. on users). For instance low qualified workers could benefit from being more mobile within their company and VDC could support horizontal mobility. This is an ongoing discussion in VDC. Cooperation with the French-speaking Professions and Qualifications Service (*Service francophone des métiers et des qualifications* – SFMQ) should also open validation to new occupations (see section 4). Further efforts need to address the 'social' recognition of VDC on the ground, by social partners and employers, which ultimately determines the 'market value' of the Skills Certificates (see section 9.3). Although recent developments show that the level of awareness among labour market actors has improved, there is still untapped potential in the way Skills Certificates are recognised and valued by these actors.

In the adult education sector (*Enseignement de promotion sociale*: EPS), VAE constitutes a major component of the government's strategy since 2014. Steps are being taken to simplify procedures and make VAE more accessible. Experts have been hired (see 2.1) to develop common procedures, improve information provided to the public and further harmonise practices between stakeholders. New reporting systems are being put in place to collect precise data on users. EPS has responsibility for two levels of education: secondary and higher education. Higher education is now subject to the new decree of 2013 described below and secondary education is still governed by the founder decree of 1991.

Stakeholders recognise that specific projects targeting immigrants/refugees are an important issue. A number of recent changes should have a positive impact on vulnerable groups. In

particular, the regulatory changes made to VAE in adult education will allow individuals to validate and get recognition certificates for single 'units', for instance language skills.

Different policies are being implemented with ESF-funds in order to help immigrants and refugees to get their skills valorised, mainly in languages: French and adult literacy (about 100 000 periods of courses of 50 minutes have been organised just for literacy in EPS) but also later in their vocational or non-vocational skills.

VAE in higher education is undergoing important changes, moving towards increased centralisation. In the higher education sector, the development of VNFIL was initially led by coordinating bodies in each sub-sector (universities, *Hautes Ecoles*, adult education, and the superior Art school). A major change since the 2014 report is the adoption of the Decree of 7 November 2013 on the organisation of higher education (including universities, *Hautes Ecoles*, and adult education providers). VAE in higher education is now implemented within one single legal framework. Such changes should improve learner/student mobility between providers within the higher education sector. The 2013 Decree is expected to have positive effects on VNFIL. In particular, it gives a stronger legal basis to VAE, the role of guidance and information staff is formally recognised, and a number of requirements for candidates are harmonised across all HE institutions.

The coordinating role of the Academy for Research and Higher Education (ARES), the agency created by the new decree, should also contribute to further institutionalisation of VNFIL in the sector. However, at this early stage of implementation, uncertainties related to the new legal dispositions are creating some challenges for practitioners.

## 2 National perspective

### 2.1 Overarching approach to validation

The skills validation system in French-speaking Belgium was set up in the context of policies promoting lifelong learning at the Federal level in the early 2000s. In 2001, the Federal Government introduced the right for all workers to undertake a 'skills audit' (*bilan de compétences*). As the exercise of this right fell under the responsibility of the Regions and Communities<sup>1</sup>, a cooperation agreement was signed in July 2003 between the three francophone governments (the Walloon Region, the French Community and the French Community Commission<sup>2</sup>). The agreement established the arrangements to allow the recognition and validation of skills acquired by individuals outside formal education settings. The agreement was formalised through three decrees<sup>3</sup>.

The overall objective was to ensure the inclusion of all citizens in the knowledge society<sup>4</sup>. A key factor of social and economic exclusion was identified as the lack of formal qualification

<sup>1</sup> In Belgium, education (initial and continuous) falls under the responsibility of the Communities, whereas vocational training (including adult education) is a regional responsibility (Walloon Region and Brussels-Capital Region).

<sup>2</sup> The Walloon region is the predominantly French-speaking region of Belgium. The French Community (*Communauté française*) refers to one of the three linguistic communities of Belgium. The French Community Commission (*Commission communautaire française*, COCOF) is the representative of the French-speaking authorities in the Brussels-Capital Region.

<sup>3</sup> Décret Communauté française du 22 octobre 2003: MB 1.12.2003

Décret Région wallonne du 13 novembre 2003: MB 23.01.2004

Décret Cocof du 7 novembre 2003: MB 03.05.2004

<sup>4</sup> The vision of the Consortium is in line with the European Council of Europe for 2018: enhance the employability and professional mobility of workers employed or unemployed, by validating skills through a system recognised by all, regardless of location or the circumstances in which skills have been acquired; strengthen social cohesion by allowing citizens who do not have a formal qualification – one of the factors leading to exclusion from the

(obtained in an educational context), even though individuals lacking such qualifications may have acquired skills through non-formal or informal contexts. Initially, the **priority target group of the scheme was therefore individuals who did not hold any formal qualifications** (CODA, 2005). Core principles included ease of access to the scheme (no cost to individuals), confidentiality and solid quality assurance processes (to guarantee the recognition of the scheme on the labour market).

Cooperation was key to make lifelong learning and VNFIL possible in the French-speaking part of Belgium. So far, cooperation has been the result of the progressive establishment of mutual trust between all education sectors and stakeholders (Mahieu, 2011).

In Belgium (Fr), VNFIL is divided into different systems or '*dispositifs*'. The main rationale and strategy behind each system are described below.

**Validation of competences (VDC)** is highly standardised and benefits from formal recognition by central authorities. It is carried out by continuous vocational training centres under the remit of a Consortium (see section 5). The stakes involved in the validation of skills have led governments to position VDC in the public service sector. VDC is now moving towards the development of more flexible arrangements and local experimentations to better suit individual needs and demands. For instance, the Consortium has designed a number of devices to make sure that demands from users (in terms of the occupations they would like to see open to validation) are better integrated in the scheme. New ways of engaging employers have also led to the opening of validation for new skills, based on a conception of professional development in the long term (e.g. team management). Such initiatives are congruent with the orientations taken by the Marshall Plan 2022<sup>5</sup>, which highlights the idea of focusing on "new occupations" (CVDC, 2015a). Validation is part of the recent political declarations of the three francophone governments. It is embedded in wider policies for employment and growth, and is expected to strengthen the coherence between education, training and the labour market.

The latest Strategic Note (2015) adopted by the Consortium highlighted a number of strategic priorities, including:

- Develop social and economic value of validation
- Strengthen collaboration with stakeholders working with vulnerable workers
- Increase the number of return to education/training
- Implement the "portfolio" based approach for validating skills.

**Valorisation of experience (VAE) in adult education**<sup>6</sup>: Adult education is aimed at individuals regardless of their age, with various educational backgrounds, various life or professional experiences, wishing to acquire, develop and update their skills. In this way, adult education is meeting the initiation, remediation, qualification, completion, reorientation, retraining or specialisation needs of an adult public. Indeed, in order to access adult education, students should no longer be subject to compulsory school obligation (source: Feprosoc, 2012).

- At secondary (vocational or non-vocational) level, VAE is used to grant admission into education pathways or exemptions but it can also lead to the issuing of certificate of achievement (*attestation de réussite*) when the student reaches the integrated final test

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labour market and social exclusion – to have the skills acquired through work experience, in employment training, life experience, recognised and validated.

<sup>5</sup> New regional strategy for a sustainable growth creating quality jobs. Validation is also present in the Plan Brussellois 2025 and Walloon region declaration 2014-2019. For instance, in its 2014-2019 regional policy, the Walloon Government intends to support the Consortium of validation of competences in order to increase the number of applicants and the number of occupations included in the scheme.

<sup>6</sup> *Enseignement de promotion sociale* (EPS): literally, education for social advancement.

(*épreuve intégrée*). A new modification of the legal bases of VAE in adult education at secondary level are being examined and would aim at enlarging the possibilities of granting more certificates of achievement (*attestations de réussite*) in specific sectors. However, it is currently still called “valorisation” even if it could be compared with “validation”.<sup>7</sup>

- In higher education, where adult education is also a stakeholder, VAE is now submitted to the Decree of 2013 which redefines the higher education landscape and standardises the practice of VAE for all concerned institutions: universities, *Hautes Ecoles*, superior Art schools and EPS adult education. It only grants admission into education pathways or exemptions.

Since the election of the new government in 2014, education and training is a major component of the Declaration of the Government of the French Community for 2014-2019. Adult education is an important element of the government policy since 2014. The Ministry in charge of adult education (EPS) adopted a strategic note (2015) to improve VAE. The note stated the need to simplify VAE produces in EPS, in particular through the adoption of a new regulatory framework making administrative procedures easier, and enabling the elaboration of “tailor made” training pathways for learners. The sector has also continued to exchange with other validation actors (Consortium, *Hautes Ecoles*, Universities) on common methodologies to improve mobility between sectors.

**Valorisation of experience (VAE) in higher education** (Universities and *Hautes Ecoles*) is used to grant admission into education pathways or exemptions. Compared to VDC, VAE is more decentralised. The work done between 2008 and 2014 (in particular under the VAE-University project and project ‘VAE Hautes Ecoles’) has contributed to make VAE an effective right (Mahieu, 2011). VAE in higher education has now entered a phase of consolidation. Important changes are related to the implementation of the Decree of 7 November 2013, which set up a new body, the Academy for Research and Higher Education (ARES). The Decree standardises a number of elements concerning VAE in all HE institutions. For instance, it allows VAE for admission for all cycles of higher education (bachelor, Master, PhD and continuous education and training). The Decree is also expected to strengthen ‘linkages’ between sub-systems.

The priority is to make VAE sustainable, and to increase access for adults who would benefit from returning to education (e.g. making procedures easier and simpler to understand), by taking into account their specific constraints and difficulties.

Overall, validation in French-speaking Belgium has moved forward since 2014 towards increased cooperation between the validation systems mentioned above. As part of the Project ‘2013, Year of Competences’ (2013, *Année des compétences*)<sup>8</sup>, an initiative of the Walloon government and the French Community, representatives of the four validation systems have established the first steps that will make future cooperation operational.<sup>9</sup> There is a clear will, on both the political and practitioners’ side, to encourage education sectors to work together to at least establish a common understanding about validation,

<sup>7</sup> The authorities have retained the term of ‘valorisation’, referring to the notion of ‘enhancing’ experience, rather than using the concept of ‘validation’ leading to the award of a qualification.

<sup>8</sup> The project is supported by Wallonia region, Wallonia-Brussels Federation and Brussels region. It aims at enhancing the attractiveness of education and training pathways in a lifelong learning perspective. More information available at <http://www.anneedescompetences.be>

<sup>9</sup> Five avenues were given priority: creation of a common online portal providing information about all types of validation procedures; possibility of using a common portfolio as a common tool for the four validation systems; development of common evaluation indicators; common guidance procedures and mechanisms; to direct all citizens interested in validation towards the various validation systems; and, establishing a pro-active research network that will reflect upon the future developments of validation in Belgium (Fr).

exchange information about their respective procedures and find solutions to the common problems they are facing.

There is a clear political will from national government (reinforced by European initiatives and incentives) to enhance such cooperation between the different systems, although it is not meant to result in uniform or standardised approaches and procedures across all sub-systems. The following section looks more closely into each of these sub-systems.

## 2.2 Validation in education and training

There are four VNFIL systems corresponding to different education sectors in French-speaking Belgium.

- *Validation des compétences* (VDC) in the field of continuous vocational training
- *Valorisation des Acquis de l'Expérience* (VAE)<sup>10</sup> in
  - Adult education (*Enseignement de Promotion Sociale*),
  - Universities, and
  - Hautes Ecoles (higher education institutions).

Despite this level of fragmentation, VNFIL in Belgium (FR) has not developed in an inconsistent way; it is the result of initiatives supported at national level; it benefits from formal recognition by central authorities, and is framed by important pieces of legislation.

Different legal frameworks apply to each VNFIL 'system'. Each system has its own governance and steering arrangements. VAE and VDC are different in several ways, with regard to their methodologies, objectives, and outcomes. In particular, it is important to make the distinction between the two concepts of 'valorisation' (to enhance and get credit for prior experience, in view of obtaining access to formal education and training) and 'validation', which gives access to a recognised title or certification.

At this stage, it is not anticipated that the country will move towards an 'integrated' system or framework for the four stages of validation (identification, documentation, assessment and certification), although VAE in higher education is now regulated by a single regulatory framework.

The table below summarises the key characteristics of each system.

**Table 2.1 Summary overview of the four systems of VNFIL in Belgium (FR)**

Name of the system	Date of introduction	Type of VNFIL	Main objective	Outcome
'Validation of competences' (VDC)	2003 (effective since 2005)	Validation	Certification	Award of a <i>Titre de Compétence</i> (Skills Certificate) which can be used to access the labour market AND/OR to access further training in adult learning or vocational training
'Valorisation of experience' (VAE) in adult education ( <i>Enseignement de Promotion Sociale - EPS</i> ) <sup>11</sup>	1991 <sup>12</sup>	Valorisation	Easing access to education and training exemptions and certification	Credits for learning outcomes gained through experience is recognised in view of obtaining access to formal education in EPS + exemptions to shorten

<sup>10</sup> Since the 2013 Decree on higher education, these three sub-systems are partly regulated by the same framework (Universities, *Hautes Écoles* and Adult education at HE level).

<sup>11</sup> *Enseignement de Promotion Sociale* (EPS) can literally be translated as "education for social advancement". Since 1991, education has been organised on a modular basis. EPS is sometimes described as "second chance" education. It aims to support the social advancement of the individual by upgrading professional knowledge and

Name of the system	Date of introduction	Type of VNFIL	Main objective	Outcome
			under conditions	training pathway + valorisation of discreet 'units' (UE) (under conditions at secondary level)
'Valorisation of experience' (VAE) in Universities	1994 <sup>13</sup> (effective since 2008)	Valorisation	Easing access to education and training	Credit for learning outcomes gained through experience is recognised in view of obtaining access to formal training in universities (+ exemptions to shorten training pathway)
('Valorisation of experience' (VAE) in <i>Hautes Écoles</i> )	1995 (effective since 2009)	Valorisation	Easing access to education and training	Credit for learning outcomes gained through experience is recognised in view of obtaining access to formal training in <i>Hautes Ecoles</i> (+ exemptions to shorten training pathway)

The different procedures are described below in more detail.

### Validation of Competences (VDC) in the field of continuous vocational training

VDC aims at recognising professional knowledge and know-how acquired outside of typical training channels. A network of training providers organise testing sessions which, when successfully carried out, lead to the issuing of a *titre de compétence* (Skills Certificate). All candidates benefit from an identical assessment procedure, on the basis of a single set of skills assessment indicators, no matter who is being assessed, where, when or how an assessment takes place. Candidates are asked to demonstrate their skill or ability in a given occupation in a situation that is typical for the given occupation, in an approved training centre.

The Skills Certificate is a legal document recognised by the three French-speaking entities. It may be used either for direct access to the labour market or access to "independent professions", or access to further training courses (in the five public bodies providing vocational training). It often leads to exemptions to shorten training pathways. It can be accumulated to obtain a qualification in the adult education sector, on the condition of passing an integrated final test (*épreuve intégrée*) organised by EPS (see below).

An important characteristic of validation in Belgium is that Skills Certificates are not equivalent to formal VET qualifications (in other systems, for instance in France, skills validation can lead directly to the award of a formal VET qualification). However, the

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socio-cultural competence. For more information: <http://www.enseignement.be/eps> (→ *professionnels* → *valorisation des acquis de l'expérience*).

<sup>12</sup> Article 8, decree of 16 April 1991. Since then the Government of the French Community has specified the modalities for the recognition of competences for access to g education in EPS (latest modifications adopted in 2011).

<sup>13</sup> In higher education, recognition of non-formal and informal learning was introduced by the Acts of 5 September 1994 in universities and 5 August 1995 in the *Hautes Écoles* (non-university higher education institutions). Universities were then authorised to organise, under specific conditions, the access, without holding the required degree, to a limited number of second-cycle programmes, as well as to grant exemptions from certain courses (reducing the duration of the studies) in all their programmes. Article 1 of the "Bologna" Act of 31 March 2004 has given a legal foundation to the procedure and introduced the terminology *Valorisation des Acquis de l'Expérience* (VAE) for higher education, although some initiatives were already in place in some universities since the 1970s. According to Mahieu (2011) it is only since 2008 that VAE is taking place on a larger scale.



standards used for validation are now the same as those in the formal system, the mobility between one and another will be easier. Since 2011, another method of issuing Skills Certificates was developed: recognition of prior learning (*Reconnaissance des acquis de formation* or “RAF”). It provides students who have successfully completed a training or part of a training in four of the five public sector training providers (Bruxelles formation, Forem, Ifapme, Sfpme) to automatically receive the Skill(s) Certificate(s) corresponding to their acquired learning outcomes. This mechanism is possible through careful and concerted consideration of the equivalence between the evaluation of the training center and the evaluation of the validation centre. This mechanism simplifies learners' pathways, builds bridges between training and promotes learning throughout life, ensuring broader diffusion of the Skills Certificates without altering their values.

### **VAE in adult education (*Enseignement de promotion sociale* - EPS)**

EPS (*enseignement de promotion sociale*: literally, ‘education for social advancement’) offers flexible courses for adults, organised into short modules, taught either during the day or evening. These courses are accessible to all and allow everyone to combine employment and training education.

On the basis of a modular design of EPS and the flexibility available in defining personal study pathways, recognition of previous experience (8th article of the decree of 1991) can allow certain courses to be waived *within* a so-called “pedagogical file”. Recognition can apply to skills acquired in any form of formal education or in other recognised types of training, and to professional experience. Where no certificates or documents are available, or when the study board deems the documents provided to be insufficient, the preliminary required skills (the set of minimum capabilities the student needs to demonstrate to take up a learning unit, to enter a unit) can be verified via a test to access a unit. Pedagogical links have been created between modules in order to create coherence. It also determines the learning outcomes (the set of capabilities – knowledge, work and/or social skills – acquired, assessed and attested on a certificate of achievement for the pedagogical file in question) necessary to achieve it. For example, it is not possible to enter ‘maths module 2’ if you do not have all the competences required and obtained from ‘maths module 1’. Competencies that you should reach at the end of module 1 are necessary to be able to follow module 2. The aim is the capitalisation of all the certificates of achievement (*attestations de réussite*) of all the pedagogical files in order to be authorised to pass the integrated final test leading to the certificate or degree of the section (*titre de section*).

EPS is organised in modules leading to credits that can be accumulated to obtain ‘titles’ (certificates or degrees, *titres de section*). These modules are called learning units (UE, i.e. *unités d’enseignement*), which are described in two types of **pedagogical files for learning units** for:

- a whole **section**: on the basis of a section's vocational profile approved by the General Council, it sets up a working group with the responsibility of compiling, for each section, a pedagogical file covering all branches. This guide serves as a common teaching reference for all EPS institutes. It lists the *general and specific goals of the section*, its *constituent modules* (identifying the “major” education modules, *how modules can be used as building blocks within the section* and, for higher education, the associated number of ECTS as well as the *diploma awarded*). Apart from the advantage of having a reference guide common to all EPS institutes, the existence of such a file facilitates student mobility between institutions.
- a single **learning unit**: as with each section, each educational module within the section similarly has its own pedagogical file. Each file lists the *overall and specific goals* of the training module, the preliminary required skills *necessary at the start of the module* and the certificates attesting such, *the module's minimum duration*, the *programme* (i.e. a list of the capabilities to be acquired), the *learning outcomes*, the *profile of the person(s) responsible for the course* (a teacher or outside expert) and practical recommendations for the *constitution of groups*.

All these files are approved by the Government of the French Community.

These files clearly establish the skills necessary to be admitted in a learning unit, the preliminary required skills (*capacité préalable requise*) and the learning outcomes (*acquis d'apprentissage*) to be acquired to validate the unit. All learning outcomes can be recognised through VAE (except the learning outcomes corresponding to the practical work that will be presented for the completion of the studies: the integrated final test, See Section 10).<sup>14</sup> VAE leads to admission or exemption (based on a test or portfolio); it can also be used to validate a unit (achievement valorisation) (*sanction*) based on a test.

Since 2011, the regulatory framework allows the automatic recognition, in all EPS education institutes, of the Skills Certificates delivered by the Consortium. Candidates can thereby be granted exemptions from certain units based on their Certificate.

Further changes are underway to modify certain dispositions set out in 2011, to make VAE easier and more attractive:

1) Certificates of achievement (*Attestations de réussite*) will be delivered on the basis of learning units. Previously, such certificates were only delivered to candidates who had completed units corresponding to a section (set of units) leading to an integrated final certification and who had registered in view of obtaining this final certification (for instance, the 'Accountant' certification, which is composed of a set of learning units). This means that in the future one unit, 'French language', could lead to the award of a certificate of achievement recognising the successful completion of this unit. This will be helpful for candidates who recently arrived in Belgium and need to get their language skills recognised.

2) The work of training providers regarding VAE will be better recognised.

The final dispositions concerning these changes are currently being discussed by the legislative bodies.

### **VAE in higher education**

Valorisation of experience (VAE) is defined in law as the process whereby the knowledge and skills of a candidate are recognised, leading to admission into education pathways or exemptions.

Through VAE, higher education institutions assess and/or recognise knowledge, skills and competences acquired by an individual who wishes to be admitted to a higher education programme. It does not lead to the award of a certification or qualification.

The Decree of 7 November 2013<sup>15</sup> has set out a common regulatory framework for all HE institutions; the decree allows VAE for admission for all cycles of higher education (bachelor, Master, PhD and continuous education and training).<sup>16</sup> It specifies certain modalities for

<sup>14</sup> Transfer of the credits gained in one EPS training body to another is possible to a certain degree. For instance, if a learner has been granted credits for obtaining a UE, he/she can decide to pass the integrated final test (*Épreuve intégrée*) necessary to complete the UE, in another EPS training body. In that case he/she will have to present the documents certifying that the learner has acquired the learning outcomes corresponding to the UE.

<sup>15</sup> Décret définissant le paysage de l'enseignement supérieur et l'organisation académique des études, adopted on 7 November 2013. Available at : [http://www.galilex.cfwb.be/document/pdf/39681\\_002.pdf](http://www.galilex.cfwb.be/document/pdf/39681_002.pdf)  
[http://www.galilex.cfwb.be/document/pdf/39681\\_002.pdf](http://www.galilex.cfwb.be/document/pdf/39681_002.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> The Bologna Act (2004) defined VAE as the process of assessing and recognising knowledge and skills of an applicant in the process of accessing higher education. The VAE procedure allowed admission to second cycle programmes or to non-degree granting training programmes, or exemptions in any higher education programme. The Act defined two types of VAE :

1. VAE for admission to second cycle programmes or to non-degree granting training programmes (mostly continuing training). To be admitted to a master programme, applicants had to prove five years of professional and personal experience (prior studies can also be taken into account).
2. VAE for exemptions allowed candidate to be exempted from part of the courses in all first and second cycle programmes, thereby reducing the duration of their studies. However, the duration of the programmes leading to the delivery of an academic degree could not be below 60 credits. Therefore, applicants to this type of VAE could

VAE: the experience that the candidates wish to see recognised must correspond to at least five years of experience (prior studies in higher education can be taken into account, up to two years, or equivalent to 120 credits).

The jury, based on the examination of the candidate's application, determines the additional courses or exemptions that will constitute the conditions for his/her admission in the study pathway.

There are no specific arrangements for Open Educational Resources (OER). However, in the case of VAE to access higher education, OER could be recognised as part of the general procedure, which aims at recognising the knowledge and skills of candidates, when such candidates can prove five years of relevant professional or personal experience. This is done through a portfolio that summarises his/her experience. Years of study (maximum two) can be included in the five years of experience, however they must be 'successfully completed' years of study. Universities would typically request a certificate/other document proving his/her participation in the course.

## 2.3 Validation and the labour market

In recent years, specific sectoral conventions were signed with social partners to increase the recognition of Skills Certificates on the labour market. Since 2006, sectoral agreements were proposed to the social partners representing key sectors active in the Walloon Region. The signing of a sectoral agreement is accompanied by proposed actions to improve validation in the sector.<sup>17</sup> They are active in 10 sectors including construction, electricity, hotel industry, hairdressing, fitness and esthetical care. With other sectors (wood, transport and logistics, etc.), no specific agreements were signed but a working plan was created to garner concrete actions to support the validation of skills.

### 2.3.1 Skills audits

In 2001, the Federal Government introduced a right of the worker to a 'skills audit' (*bilan de compétences*). The law grants every worker a right to be assessed to identify and validate skills gained outside the formal education system.

Although the law on the *bilan de compétences* was due to enter into force towards the end of 2002, the need to develop appropriate validation and assessment structures meant that the system was not operational until the beginning of 2004. The instruments allowing this right to be exercised falling under the remit of Regions and Communities, a Cooperation Agreement was signed on 24 July 2003 between the Walloon Region, the French Community and the French Community Commission, relating to the validation of skills in the field of continuous vocational training<sup>18</sup>. This Cooperation Agreement aimed, primarily, at implementing mechanisms that will allow for skills acquired by individuals through experiences in daily life, at work or during vocational training to be recognised.

What makes skills audits different from other initiatives in the area of continuous training is that it is aimed at fostering professional development. The objective is to allow individuals to analyse their competences, not only professional but also personal, as well as motivations and skills, in order to define a professional project and ultimately, a training project. The advantage for workers is to be able to undertake new tasks in the same job position, or move to new positions (with the same employer or with a new company).

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never be granted an academic degree based only on this procedure. This is the reason why the procedure is called 'valorisation' and not 'validation' (which is the term used in the French system).

<sup>17</sup> Action 1 Production of occupation profiles and training pathways (SFMQ); Action 2: Production and monitoring of validation standards; Action 3: Communication around the validation of skills, in the specific sector concerned; Action 4: Strengthening the market value of the certificate.

<sup>18</sup> Three decrees resulting in approval of the Cooperation Agreement were subsequently adopted by the relevant levels of power: French Community decree dated 22 October 2003; Walloon Region decree dated 13 November 2003; Cocof (French Community Commission) decree dated 7 November 2003.

Specialised services provide information to individuals interested in skills audits:

- ONEM (Office National de l'Emploi): [www.onem.be](http://www.onem.be)
- ACTIRIS (Office Régional Bruxellois de l'Emploi) : [www.actiris.be](http://www.actiris.be)
- FOREM (Service Public Wallon de l'Emploi et de la Formation): [www.leforem.be](http://www.leforem.be)

Skills audits are carried out by skills audits professionals. Skills audits can sometimes be free or means-tested. For instance, the local employment office in the Brussels region supports jobseekers to elaborate a professional project ([www.bruxellesformation.be](http://www.bruxellesformation.be)).

A skills audit in Belgium is similar to the procedure in place in France. It consists of three phases<sup>19</sup>:

- Early phase: the candidate confirms his/her commitment, formulates his/her request, assesses his/her needs, and is informed on the methods and techniques that will be implemented.
- Investigation: motivations, competences, skills of the beneficiary are identified and analysed, and assessed against the opportunities on the labour market and training provision in the region.
- Conclusion: the service provider (skill auditor) clarifies the success factors of the project elaborated by the candidate, as well as the steps necessary for its implementation. The results of the skills audit are communicated to the beneficiary only, in the form of a summary document (which the beneficiary can choose to communicate to a third party).

## 2.4 Validation and the third sector

The 2014 Inventory reported that although associations working in the social integration sector had welcomed the validation procedures and Skills Certificates, no specific tools or processes had been set up by the sector. The Consortium had engaged in information and awareness-raising activities geared towards the sector and it had planned to develop toolkits for specific organisations for instance working with illiterate groups.

Links between VDC and the third sector seem to be gradually developing. The 2012 activity report of the Consortium noted that some candidates were being sent to validation centres by non-profit organisations (ASBL).

In relation to VAE in higher education, voluntary activities can be taken into account in the 'relevant experience' presented in the candidate's portfolio. At ULB university for instance in an online application, the procedure entitles the candidate either to translate his/her experience in several forms that enable the committee to assess it on a formal academic level, and to present adequate documents justifying his/her previous experience (including work certificates, certificates of activities carried out in associations, community sector).

The VDC procedure, coordinated by the Consortium on the Validation of competences, allows the validation of skills corresponding to a number of occupations in the personal services sector, such as household/cleaning assistance, or the HORECA sector (bartender, waiter etc.).

## 3 Links to national qualification systems

### *Qualifications and qualifications frameworks*

Regarding measures to improve synergy between education providers and networks, the development of the national qualification framework (NQF) has resulted in increased cooperation between stakeholders.

<sup>19</sup> For more information see: <http://www.apefasbl.org/lapef/actions-et-projets/bc/bilan-de-competences-brochure>

The French Community has been working on a national qualifications framework linked to the EQF since 2006, with work on a qualifications framework for the higher education sector, linked to the Bologna process, taking place in parallel. In 2010, the governments of the French Community, the Walloon Region and the French Community Commission (*Commission communautaire française-Cocof*) entrusted the task of creating and managing the Qualifications Framework to an intergovernmental working group by means of a cooperation agreement.

A Decree was adopted in May 2015<sup>20</sup>, operationalising the agreement between the three francophone governments on the creation of a francophone qualification framework (*Cadre francophone des certifications, CFC*). The NQF is based on eight levels (consistent with the EQF) and two entries (for education qualifications and vocational qualifications), compatible with the framework for Flanders (*Vlaamse kwalificatiestructuur (VKS)*). This dual-entry common framework has the advantage that it meets the objectives of the EQF, while upholding the objective differences between the two types of qualification and, in particular, the fact that the education system has objectives that extend beyond gaining employment<sup>21</sup>.

The Decree defines “certification” as the formal result of an evaluation and validation carried out by a competent authority, establishing that an individual possesses the learning outcomes corresponding to determined standards, either at the end of an education or training pathway or following the validation of his/her competences.

In the Decree’s definition, part of the NQF objectives is to support the objective of facilitating the recognition and validation of informal and non-formal learning.

The dual entry framework will allow the positioning of certifications delivered on the one hand by the competent authorities in higher education, general and specialised secondary education and secondary level social promotion education (EPS); on the other hand, competent authorities in vocational training and the validation of competences.<sup>22</sup>

Certifications or validations, which do not cover a significant or coherent set of learning outcomes, can still refer to the final certification to which they pertain, and its positioning in the NQF.<sup>23</sup>

- Skills Certificates will not be directly referenced to the NQF. However, the Decree states that certifications or validations, which do not cover a significant or coherent set of learning outcomes, can still refer to the final certification to which they pertain, and its positioning in the NQF.
- As explained in 2.2., Skills Certificates can also be used to access further training courses and can be accumulated to obtain a qualification in the adult education sector which will be referenced in the NQF.
- Concerning VAE: the dual entry NQF is designed to include both education qualifications and diplomas and VET qualifications.

<sup>20</sup> *Décret portant assentiment à l'accord de coopération conclu le 26 février 2015 entre la Communauté française, la Région wallonne et la Commission communautaire française relatif à la création et la gestion d'un Cadre francophone des certifications, en abrégé « CFC »*, Available at : <http://archive.pfwb.be/1000000201500e>

<sup>21</sup> For more details, see Publication Analysis and overview of NQF developments in European countries. Annual report 2014, <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/belgium-fr-european-inventory-nqf-2014>

<sup>22</sup> Four criteria need to be fulfilled to be included in the NQF: 1) certifications must be recognised and validated by public authorities; 2) relevance (certifications must cover a significant and coherent set of learning outcomes allowing integration in the labour market; for general education, certifications must allow the pursuit of education at a higher level, or integration in the labour market); 3) evaluation of learning outcomes (certification must be the result of a formal evaluation process whereby the competent authority certifies the acquired learning outcomes); and, 4) existing quality assurance processes.

<sup>23</sup> “*Les certifications ou validations qui ne visent pas un ensemble significatif et cohérent d’acquis d’apprentissage, peuvent faire référence à la certification finale à laquelle elles sont rattachées et à son positionnement*”

- In adult education, VAE can be used to access formal training which will lead to formal certificates (*titres de section*) which will be referenced on the NQF (if they fulfil the criteria defined in the Decree)
- In higher education, VAE can be used to access higher education programmes, leading to formal certifications which will be referenced on the NQF (if they fulfil the four criteria defined in the Decree).

## 4 Standards

### **Standards used in VDC**

In vocational training, the ‘validation’ process leads to the award of a Skills Certificate, which is a legal document, recognised by the Walloon region, the French Community and the French Community Commission (Cocof).

The standards for validation are now the same as those in the formal system<sup>24</sup>. A common body, the French-speaking Professions and Qualifications Service (*Service Francophone des Métiers et des Qualifications* – SFMQ)<sup>25</sup> is responsible for building these standards.

The SFMQ<sup>26</sup> is in charge of producing common standards based on occupation standards elaborated by social partners (*Profils métiers*), and corresponding training standards (*Profils de formation*) elaborated by education and training stakeholders.<sup>27</sup> Most importantly, the professional standards and training standards produced by SFMQ are to be ‘shared’ by the different education and training providers (initial and continuous education, as well as socio-professional integration providers), as well as by the VDC Consortium.

These standards are expressed in learning outcomes and a system of units compatible with the ECVET system is intended to enable mobility between different operators and types of learning (formal, non-formal and informal). To ensure that all providers will use the profiles drawn by SFMQ as common reference standards, the job profiles are compatible with those developed by the French ROME system (*Répertoire Opérationnel des Métiers et des Emplois*). Qualification and training profiles are developed in close consultation with sector representatives and the unions. These profiles specify the competences required for each occupational profile, together with associated indicators.

Since 2012, the Consortium has worked towards the harmonisation of their validation standards with the profiles defined by SFMQ. This work has been consolidated in 2014. Meetings between the management teams and methodological experts from the two bodies

<sup>24</sup> This is an area where important changes have taken place since 2010. In the initial phase, the Belgium validation system had not established an automatic link between the Skills Certificates and existing qualifications in the formal system.

<sup>25</sup> A cooperation agreement was signed in 2009 between the three francophone governments to create the service. SFMQ brings together PES, training providers, social inclusion services, and the Skills Validation Consortium. Its objectives are to produce occupation profiles in line with the reality of today’s jobs; to produce training standards in line with these profiles, to ensure that all training providers use these common training standards, to allow better mobility between training providers (recognition of prior learning); to establish links between these profiles and PES tools. For more information on SFMQ: <http://www.sfmq.cfwb.be/index.php?id=1436>

<sup>26</sup> A cooperation agreement was signed in Brussels on 27 March 2009 between the French-speaking Community, the Walloon government and the Cocof concerning the creation of the Service. For more information on SFMQ: <http://www.sfmq.cfwb.be/index.php?id=1436>

<sup>27</sup> The system previously consisted of job profiles developed by the French register of occupations in the labour market (ROME) and by the ‘Commission Communautaire des Professions et des Qualifications’ (CCPQ). The CCPQ developed sets of qualification and training profiles, in consultation with sector representatives and the unions. Standards developed by the SFMQ (see before) are now used. The creation of the French-speaking Professions and Qualifications Service (SFMQ) in 2010 was expected to foster synergies between education and training providers and promote more efficiency. The objective was to increase cooperation between education providers, to rationalise and improve the coherence of the French Community education system.

took place to establish a model for *avis de conformité*, determining the conformity of the validation standards produced by the Consortium with the SFMQ profiles (CDVC, 2015a).

For each occupation open to VDC, a Commission for Skills Unit Indicators (COREF) is set up, gathering employers, labour representatives and education and training providers. The COREF follows a methodology aimed at outlining the necessary criteria for the verification of the acquisition of skills.

Each occupation is divided into several skill units. For example, the household assistance profession includes two skills units: 1) upkeep of the home and 2) laundry. This subdivision into skills units can be justified by the fact that a single person may only be an expert in one part of the occupation but should, nonetheless, be able to seek employment thanks to their skill. It is these skills units which will be subject to validation. This should allow candidates to have their expertise recognised for part or for all of the skills involved in an occupation. Therefore, the COREF defines:

- The Skill Reference Indicators: the key activities related to the occupation and the required skills for its undertaking.
- The Skill Units: each corresponding to a Skills Certificate. Each Unit corresponds to a Validation Reference Indicator.
- The Validation Reference Indicators: define the testing situation, the task to be carried out, the conditions for testing for each skill unit to be validated and the assessment criteria sheet, with assessment being undertaken via indication criteria.

Finally, the Consortium aligns its work with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

#### **Standards used in higher education**

VAE in Belgium does not lead directly to certification. It only grants access to a study programme or exemptions. The standards used for assessing the non-formal and informal learning are the requirements (in terms of learning outcomes) of the programme for which the applicant wishes to gain entry or exemption.

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

As described in Section 2.2, there are four systems of validation in French-Speaking Belgium. The French-Speaking Government of the French Community and the Walloon and Brussels Regions are involved in various respects but each system, governed by a specific legal framework, has its own institutional framework.

Therefore there is no overall framework or overarching national institution responsible for the validation systems in Belgium (Fr).

- VDC falls under the responsibility of the relevant Executive powers; namely, the governments of the French Community, of the Walloon region and of the French Community Commission.
- VAE in adult education (*Enseignement de Promotion Sociale*) falls within the remit of competence of the Regions. The government of the French Community.
- VAE in higher education is highly decentralised as higher education institutions have a large degree of autonomy.

As noted in Section 2.2, the country is moving towards a more coordinated approach, which could gradually establish institutional linkages between the four systems. In addition, with the adoption of the decree on the organisation of higher education (November 2013), a new body (ARES) is now responsible for accrediting all higher education programmes and for coordinating VAE in higher education. A more detailed description of the institutional landscape of validation in French Speaking Belgium follows.

### VDC in continuous vocational training

Validation in the field of continuous vocational training has been developed by a [Consortium](#)<sup>28</sup> of the five most important public sector training providers in French-speaking Belgium:

- FOREM (*Service public Wallon de l'emploi et la formation*, Walloon Employment and Vocational Training Service, equivalent to the Flemish VDAB);
- Bruxelles Formation (Public sector training agency in the Brussels-Capital region);
- Enseignement de Promotion Sociale (Adult Education Provider in the 'communauté française' – i.e. Wallonia and Brussels-Capital Regions);
- Institut de Formation des Petites et Moyennes Entreprises - IFAPME (Training Agency for the Self Employed and SMEs in the Communauté Française); and,
- Service de Formation des petites et moyennes entreprises - SFPME, (Training Service for Small and Medium-Sized enterprises in Brussels).

The Consortium is a streamlined structure mobilising the largest platform in terms of vocational qualifications in French-speaking Belgium.

This structure is completed by two external bodies: 1) an Advisory Committee and approval of validation centres, in charge of overall direction through Strategic Guidance Notes, overall evaluation based on annual activity reports, accreditation centres, selection of qualifications validated; and, 2) a Board of Appeal, in charge of appeal of candidates and validation centres.

The Consortium is responsible for designing the procedures, methods and approaches that will be implemented in validation centres, thereby ensuring a high degree of standardisation (see section 4). Furthermore, the Consortium is responsible for providing information to the public (mostly through its website) about validation.

The Consortium oversees the network of centres which carry out the recognition and validation of competencies. It is responsible for implementing the accreditation of the validation centres in the framework of a quality assurance approach. Validation centres are training providers; they are accredited by a Consultation and Approval Committee for validation centres, and receive approval from the government. They are responsible for providing support/ information to potential candidates (although they do not strictly speaking provide 'guidance' which does not fall under their missions). They organise the validation sessions and carry out the assessment.

Improving the steering of the VDC system to increase its efficiency was part of the strategic priorities of the Consortium for 2012-2014 (CVDC, 2012). The system has been rationalised through the development of a database on the units covered in all centres. Validation sessions are now planned ahead, at the beginning of the year.

### VAE in adult education (EPS)

Adult education falls under the responsibility of the Government of the French Community. Each EPS institute determines the procedures used for treating and assessing VAE applications. Each institute also decides how to support candidates.

Ultimately, the decision to grant admission, exemption or certification is taken by the Study board (*Conseil des études*) in charge of each learning unit (UE). The programme of each unit is public and common to the 161 adult education institutes. These pedagogical files (*dossiers pédagogiques*) must be approved by the Government of the French Community.

The legal framework of EPS is the decree of 16 April 1991 for the secondary education and EPS providing higher education is now regulated by the 2013 Decree on the higher education landscape.

<sup>28</sup> Consortium de Validation des Compétences



### VAE in higher education (Universities, EPS and *Hautes Ecoles*)

The following institutions are involved in the recognition process:

- The Academy for Higher Education and Research (ARES) and its Committee for 'Continuous training and lifelong learning' is in charge of VAE.<sup>29</sup>
- Higher education institutions are responsible for the operational implementation of VAE. Moreover, they also play a major role in the dissemination of information to the applicants and to the other stakeholders involved.
- The Ministry of the French Community (DG Non-Compulsory Education and Scientific Research) plays an interface role with non-institutional stakeholders, facilitating the cooperation between those stakeholders and advisory bodies.
- Advisory bodies, such as General Council for *Haute Ecoles* and the Education and Training Council, play a crucial role in the cooperation and dialogue between institutions.

## 6 Information, advice and guidance

### 6.1 Awareness-raising and recruitment

As part of the event '2013, Year of Competences' (2013, *Année des compétences*), an initiative of the Walloon government and the French Community, all training providers implemented actions to promote the various ways and opportunities whereby citizens can acquire competences and get them recognised. Validation was part of the themes highlighted during the year<sup>30</sup>. One of the outcomes was the creation of an online portal providing information about all types of validation procedures in Belgium (Fr)<sup>31</sup>. Anyone can now get an overview of the procedures in place in the different education and training sectors.

#### VDC

Any person who is above 18, has completed compulsory schooling and is registered in Belgium as country of residence, is entitled to apply for the validation of his/her competences. Citizens are informed about VDC via the Consortium website, the diffusion of information material, a newsletter, targeted emails to job seekers and advertising campaigns in the media (e.g. Metro, in 2010). A new website for the validation of competences was put online in February 2015, with two entrances: one public entrance, and one for 'professionals' (counsellors, companies, actors in the validation of skills). The site is one of the main elements of communication, which also includes targeted newsletters (to Centres, counsellors and General Public) and actions on social networks (CVDC, 2015a).

Awareness raising about VDC is also done via information provided by professionals working in PES (e.g. *Carrefours Emplois Formation*, counsellors in the FOREM) and more recently by targeted information about specific occupations sent to jobseekers.

<sup>29</sup> Note: Until 2014, the development of VAE in Universities was driven by the VAE-University project, an inter-university coordination project led by the Lifelong Learning Committee of the CIUF and supported by ESF funds and Wallonia-Brussels Federation since 2008. To ensure that the VAE system would develop in a consistent way, the CIUF created a VAE platform to promote coordinated actions among universities, harmonised practices in terms of candidate support, and exchange of good practices. Moreover, in the framework of the ESF funding programme 2007-2013, the project 'VAE Hautes Écoles' was co-financed by ESF. The project ended at the end of 2014.

<sup>30</sup> In 2013, the Consortium took an active part in the organisation and implementation of the initiative '2013 Années des Compétences'. Several indicators reported in their 2012 Activity report demonstrate positive impacts of their strategy, for instance the number of visitors on the website has increased to reach almost 43 900 visitors in 2012 (among which 63 % were new visitors).

<sup>31</sup> See: <http://www.valorisermonexperience.be>

Counsellors in public employment services play a key role to inform the persons who might benefit from validation of the existence of the VDC scheme and to provide them with the relevant information (e.g. how to direct them to validation centres). A guide<sup>32</sup> for Counsellors has been elaborated by the Consortium for the validation of skills.

In VDC, specific efforts are dedicated to engaging groups that are particularly hard to reach, by establishing cooperation with organisations working directly with these groups. For example, collaboration with regional centres dedicated to supporting and integrating immigrants should help reaching these groups.

## EPS

There is no comprehensive centralised information system available yet. Therefore, the Minister in charge with EPS introduced a demand on the EFS funding programme 2014-2020 for the co-financing of the recruitment of a person who would be in charge of the development of common VAE procedures in EPS and with the other stakeholders. The project was accepted and an expert has been hired. This expert is currently working on the possible ways of providing information to the public.

Pedagogic experts have also been recruited to help the EPS learning institutes raise awareness of the VAE procedure and foster sharing of good practices. It is still in a phase of development and testing.

The implementation of a common website and common communication material in all EPS education institutes is planned.

Each EPS institute informs the citizens on their websites and details it in its rules of procedure.

## VAE in higher education

Citizens are informed about VAE in universities via various channels: the website dedicated to VAE in universities<sup>33</sup>, individual university websites, admission and guidance services in universities, articles in the media, and higher education fairs for prospective students.

In the framework of the new VAE 2020 project, VAE will be promoted among a large public: adults, private and public sector, labour market integration organisations, etc. In particular, it will strive to improve its visibility among hard to reach groups (for instance, partnerships with organisations promoting socio-professional integration, with PES such as FOREM, ACTIRIS). Candidates should also benefit from improved support and guidance services.

Today the priority is to increase access for adults who would benefit from returning to education. Some universities are focusing on vulnerable groups: job seekers, minorities, migrants (e.g. ULB).

Previously, the project<sup>34</sup>, which was partly funded by ESF, also targeted job seekers. Despite an increase in the percentage of job seekers among all VAE candidates (18 % in 2012) they remain a marginal group. One problem seems to be the lack of awareness of unemployed people about VAE opportunities in higher education.

## VAE in Hautes Ecoles

Citizens are informed about VAE in *Hautes Ecoles* via information leaflets, websites of *Hautes Ecoles*, admission services and external partners (FOREM, VDC Consortium, Actiris, Council of social advancement education, Ministry of the French Community).

<sup>32</sup> Available at: [http://www.cvdc.be/sites/default/files/public/uploads/common/guide-conseiller-08\\_4\\_01.pdf](http://www.cvdc.be/sites/default/files/public/uploads/common/guide-conseiller-08_4_01.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.vae-universite.be>

<sup>34</sup> From 2008 to 2012, 373 awareness-raising activities were carried out to inform the target audience, resulting in more than 7 000 persons receiving information via these activities. More than 300 of these activities took place in Universities. Source: CIUF (2013), *Projet VAE-Université 2008-2013. Résultats et Perspectives*, Mai 2013.

Other elements that have contributed to consolidate VAE since 2014 are: further development of the VAE website ([www.vae-he.be](http://www.vae-he.be)), the implementation of a communication plan; strengthening the network of VAE counsellors; a survey among VAE students; and, the participation in the campaign 'Années des Compétences' in 2013.

## 6.2 Information, advice and guidance

### VDC

Support and advice is provided to candidates by validation centres. The main objective is to help the candidate to assess whether s/he has good chances to pass the validation session, by applying various self-evaluation tools for each occupation. Candidates receive information on the validation process, the different stages, the examination methods etc. During this phase the applicant will also determine, during an interview with a member of the validation centre, which Certificate s/he would like to obtain. Following this first phase of information and guidance, the applicant will go through a practical exam (see Section 5.1 for a description of the assessment).<sup>35</sup>

It is important to note that the core activity of validation centres (which are training providers) is first and foremost, to train individuals, and not to provide guidance. To ensure that candidates go through the whole validation procedure and attend the test sessions, stronger partnerships are being established with guidance professionals from PES. These professionals can play a key role, prior to but also after validation. Indeed the counsellor is also responsible for guidance once the Skills Certificate has been obtained, in particular regarding the recognition of this Certificate by employers.

The consortium is currently examining the possibility to transfer information between the consortium database (VAL'ID) and PES data: Certificates would automatically be registered in the PES database; and, PES would be better informed to answer employers' requests about their needs for skilled employees. Skills could directly be enhanced on the labour market. The Executive Unit of the Consortium, in accordance with the 2012-2014 Strategic Guidance Note has used a lawyer specialising in matters of private data treatment. (CDVC, 2015a).

The Consortium is also working with many partners to promote access to validation for a large public (e.g. AViQ, Cellules de reconversion, DELACRE, etc.)

### Higher Education

According to the 2013 Decree on the organisation of higher education, support and guidance provision is compulsory. The Decree also officially recognises the function of 'VAE counsellor'.

Thanks to the funding received by the VAE-University project (2007-2013), a dozen VAE counsellors were hired. VAE counsellors play a key role throughout the VAE procedure, providing guidance not only to candidates but also to members of VAE juries and programme coordinators. In 2014, there were nine VAE counsellors in French-speaking universities.

With the continuation of the activities under the new VAE 2020 project, guidance and counselling remain an important focus of universities' efforts. Data collected by the VAE platform in 2013 indicated positive impact of guidance provided by VAE counsellors during the identification and documentation phase. Indeed candidates who chose to proceed with the preparation of their application without the support of a VAE counsellor were more likely to abandon the VAE procedure before completion and more likely to see their applications negatively assessed by the VAE jury, compared to candidates who were supported by a VAE counsellor.

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<sup>35</sup> <http://www.cvdv.be/fr/usager/comment-sinscrire.html>

*Haute Ecoles* (20 in francophone Belgium) also have VAE counsellors who were specifically trained to accompany VAE candidates while they elaborate their application file. However, since the end of the VAE project (2014), the costs of hiring VAE counsellors are borne by *Hautes Ecole*.

The missions of the VAE counsellors (trained by the VAE unit) are to:

- Provide guidance and support to candidates (individually or collectively). This includes answering questions candidates may have, helping them to define their professional project, accompanying them throughout the procedure once the feasibility of the application has been established (e.g. identifying the competences that are relevant to the programme, formulating the experience gained in the light of the competences required, constructing 'narratives' around the candidate's experience that will match the jury's requirements), if necessary, preparing candidates for the oral interview and informing candidates about the *Haute Ecole's* decision concerning their application (Mahieu, 2011);
- Ensure internal and external communication about VAE;
- Build a network of resources persons; and,
- Support the VAE juries as observers or provide additional information on the application being examined.

A satisfaction survey was carried out with VAE counsellors and candidates in 2014 (Agence FSE, 2014). The key points are summarised below.

In 2014, VAE counsellors highlighted a number of obstacles, some stemming from the degree of uncertainty related to the new legal dispositions. The workload is also important. Helpful developments include the constitution of a 'bank of cases', exchange of practices between counsellors, discussions about how to interpret the new legal framework. Positive aspects also include: the increased visibility of VAE, the relations between counsellors and candidates, the collaboration with other actors (managers, trainers etc.).

Another difficulty is related to the fact that the objective of VAE (return to studies for adults) is not always in line with the objectives of other stakeholders such as training providers and employment services, who are rather focused on a rapid integration on the labour market.

From the point of view of students, satisfaction is high concerning the relations with counsellors. However, obstacles remain concerning, in particular, students' availability to attend classes (most VAE students work during the day), the complexity of the application file, and the level of difficulty of the examinations.

## EPS

EPS is submitted to the decree as described above.

At secondary education level, each institute is free to organise the information on VAE-procedures and possibilities. They mainly organise information sessions and meetings with members of the study board in charge of the decisions of valorisation. The candidates receive the pedagogical files (*dossiers pédagogique*) of the units they would like to see valorised. This pedagogical file allows the applicant to assess his skills and learning outcomes. Many institutes also have guidance counsellors who help the candidates make their choice.

Besides the information of the local learning institutes, the Ministry is providing general information about VAE on its website: <http://www.enseignement.be/eps> (→ *professionnels* → *valorisation des acquis de l'expérience*).

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

To increase the market value of the Skills Certificate, and ensure a complete transparency of these certifications, partnerships have been developed between public training providers in the Brussels region, Actiris (PES agency) and the Consortium. Meetings and workshops

were also organised with restructuring units. As a result, Actiris included the Skills Certificates in its database used to register the certifications and qualifications held by job seekers registering with the agency (CDVC, 2012).

**Box 1 The individual competence portfolio online (*Cahier Individuel de competences, CIC*)**

An interesting initiative is the creation of a digital portfolio to facilitate the identification of acquired skills. The user can create and update the files and decides with whom they will be shared. Copies of certificates, references, and job profiles can be attached to the file. The aim is to use it as a common tool for the different validation systems existing in Belgium. It could be used by the certificate holders and also by PES and employers if the user wishes.

The FOREM, IFAPME, the Validation Consortium, EPS and the French Community have developed the tool jointly. <http://crf.wallonie.be/cic/home/>

In higher education, collaborations between VAE counsellors and public bodies for labour market integration (FOREM, ACTIRIS) resulted in better awareness of VAE among the unemployed.

## 7 Validation practitioners

### 7.1 Profile of validation practitioners

#### VDC

Validation centres are established training providers run by the consortium partners. A panel composed of the examiner and the observer assesses applicants. Examiners are trainers or teachers or experienced professionals. Observers are professionals experienced in the relevant occupation (See 7.2).

#### VAE in Higher education

The *Jury de valorisation* is the body recognising the professional and personal experience of the applicants. The jury evaluates and takes a decision on the non-formal and informal learning, subject to recognition. The jury formally transmits the results of the assessment and may give some recommendations regarding the future study programme of the applicant. The department of the HEI in charge of recognition of non-formal and informal recognition selects the members of the jury.

VAE counsellors are recruited directly by universities and support both candidates and jury members. Their position is now becoming institutionalised in universities and their role has been formally recognised by the 2013 Decree on higher education.

The project VAE 2020 (taking over activities of project 'VAE-Universities') has planned activities to improve their professional development, through continuous exchanges between counsellors in universities but also exchanges with VAE support staff in *Hautes Ecole* and Higher education in Adult education (EPS).

Until 2014, this was considered a 'new occupation, at the crossroads between career guidance counsellors, admission services and education counsellors' (CUIF, 2013). Most of them hold a degree in social science (psychology, sociology, education science). They were generally employed, in their first job, in the guidance or admission services of a university or the employment agency (e.g. FOREM). There was no formal training specifically designed to become a VAE counsellor. However, continuous training was provided to the counsellors via the VAE platform (e.g. information sessions, training workshops facilitated by VAE experts from France).

#### EPS

In EPS, the study board (*conseil des études*) is in charge of the assessment of the VAE application. It is composed of the headmaster and professionals of education in the field

targeted by the candidate. The professionals are the teachers of the units composing the section.

## 7.2 Qualification requirements

### VDC

Evaluators are employed by a validation centre, or have a temporary contract with the centre. To become an evaluator, one must:

- Be a trainer or teacher of the occupation concerned by the validation;
- Belong to one of the five public institutions' members of the Validation Consortium (*Bruxelles Formation, Enseignement de Promotion sociale, FOREM-formation, IFAPME, SFPME*); or,
- Have five years' experience in the occupation concerned by the validation, having left the occupation less than five years ago.

Observers are professionals in the occupation concerned by validation. They are appointed by the validation centre and must:

- Have five years' experience in the occupation concerned by the validation; having left the occupation less than five years ago; and,
- Not have any professional or personal links to the candidate. If such link exists, the validation centre must choose another observer.

### VAE

Generally, there are no specific, explicit qualification requirements for VAE counsellors or member of VAE juries.

### EPS

The teachers composing the study board are hired according to their qualifications which are legally determined by the French Community.

## 7.3 Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

### VDC

The training of evaluators for VDC is compulsory and strongly advised for validation centre managers. A methodological expert provides the training from the Consortium. The Consortium delivers training to evaluators and staff involved in the management of validation.

In 2014, a new basic and continuous training programme was developed. It is open to all stakeholders involved in the validation centres (Centres managers, evaluators, admin staff, and observers):

- Basic training covers: general information and methodology (module 1); instructions and guidance (Module 2); quality and accreditation (Module 3); and, administrative management of a session: training on the VAL'ID platform (Module 4). In 2014, 35 participants took part in the new basic training. In 2015, the training was offered four times, and attracted 81 participants.
- One-day continuous training was introduced for the first time in 2014 on the theme of pre- and post-validation-session guidance (CDVC, 2015a). In 2015, 20 participants attended the training.

Bruxelles Formation has developed a partnership with Actiris to build a competency identification process that can lead to validation. A pilot project took place in 2013 (storekeeper) (CDVC, 2015a).

### VAE in the higher education sector

Continuous training will be provided to the VAE counsellors via the VAE2020 project.

VAE counsellors play a crucial role in the training and support to members of the juries examining and assessing candidates' files. The 2014 inventory report noted increasing awareness about the need to improve guidance provided to VAE jury members in higher education. Indeed, VAE marked a profound change for higher education institutions with the task of identifying and measuring learning that is accomplished outside their boundaries and acceptance of other forms of learning.

In 2015, the *Hautes Ecoles* created a working group, composed of VAE counsellors. The group meets twice a year to monitor changes affected VAE from a legal point of view, and exchange good practices.

### EPS

The teachers in EPS benefit from training organised by the French Community among others. They are regularly evaluated by the headmaster of their centre. The Service of Inspection of the EPS regularly checks the level of the assessment criteria sheets used to evaluate the learning outcomes defined in the pedagogical file

## 8 Quality assurance

There is no national framework for QA related to VNFIL in Belgium (Fr). In the continuous vocational training sector, the Consortium overseeing validation is responsible for implementing the accreditation of the validation centres in the framework of a quality assurance approach.

A stringent and concerted methodology in defining assessment criteria has been developed by the Consortium (See Section 3 and 4). These criteria are recognised by the Walloon region, the French Community and the French Community Commission (Cocof).

In terms of validation standards, the Consortium is pursuing close cooperation with SFMQ to adjust their standards with those produced by the new body (see Section 4). In 2012, activities were dedicated to ensuring the consistency between the profiles developed by SFMQ and the competence standards developed by the Consortium. For occupations not yet covered by the Consortium, a request is sent to SFMQ so that the Consortium can develop validation standards (CVDC, 2012).

In addition, the following quality criteria should be met in assessment procedures:

- Transparency: all candidates receive identical information about the assessment procedure.
- Fairness: all candidates benefit from an identical assessment procedure, on the basis of a single set of skills assessment indicators, no matter who is being assessed, where, when or how an assessment takes place.
- Validity: assessment procedures are stringent.

The procedures in place during the validation session to assess candidates (e.g. presence of an observer) ensure further quality assurance criteria (see Section 5 on methods).

The high stakes involved in the validation of skills have led governments to position the validation mechanism in the public service sector whilst retaining close ties with management and labour representatives on strategic, normative and operational levels. To guarantee both the quality and homogeneity of VDC, an approval mechanism for validation centres has been implemented. Specific approval for each profession is required to validate the skills of candidates. Candidate Centres prepare their programmes on the basis of a list of specifications issued by the Consortium. After a preliminary audit undertaken by independent verification bodies as well as an opinion from management and labour representatives, validation centres receive approval by governments<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.cvdc.be/fr/english-version/approval-of-validation-centres.html>

National legislation does not specify any particular quality assurance mechanisms for VAE procedures in higher education. Since HEIs are responsible for the organisation and implementation of the recognition of prior learning procedures, they are expected to guarantee the quality of the procedures.

For higher education, assessment of the quality is provided by the AEQES, the common auditors of all higher education's stakeholders. For the secondary level quality coordinators are also following the methods proposed by the AEQES and the service of Inspection of the EPS.



## 9 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

### 9.1 Funding

#### VDC

Governments subsidise the validation tests. Compensations received by the observers are covered by European funds.

Funding dedicated to VDC has remained stable. However, funding has not increased proportionally with the increase in the number of candidates seeking to have their competences validated (see Section 9.4).

The related increase in administrative work is creating difficulties for the financing of the validation sessions. Currently, validation centres partly compensate for the discrepancy between government subsidies and the real costs associated with validation, using their own funds (CVDC, 2012).

All operators receive subsidies that have not changed since 2010. IFAPME, FOREM and providers of social promotion education continue to offset on their own funds. In the Wallonia-Brussels federation for instance, the government subsidises the sessions up to a specified annual quota. Exceeding costs are borne by the validation centre who exceeded the quota allocated (CVDC, 2015a).<sup>37</sup>

#### VAE in higher education

VAE in universities is partly supported by regional funding, partly by universities and partly by European funds (no specific information on the breakdown was available). The 2013 Decree also changed the way VAE is being financed.

Currently, three universities out of six benefit from European funding to implement VAE. These three universities take part in the VAE 2020 project. The project VAE 2020 coordinated by ARES shares similarities with the project VAE-Universités (2007-2013)<sup>38</sup> – for instance, an inter-university platform will be set up – but it will take the development of VAE further.

#### EPS

EPS is funded by the Government of the French Community. It represents close to 3 million periods of classes (one period equals 50 minutes). The funding has remained stable for a few years but it did not grow proportionally with the increase of administrative work. Extra funding is also found in the EFS-funds and through different contracts with training organisations, PES, sectorial funds.

### 9.2 Distribution of costs

In all four systems of validation, the procedures are free for candidates.

The details on the costs can be found in relation to VDC only. The Consortium manages the funding dedicated to validation sessions. The cost of validation sessions varies from EUR 110 to 390, depending on the competence unit of the occupation in question. For the

<sup>37</sup> In the Walloon region, the government subsidizes validation sessions up to EUR 200 000. Exceeding costs (i.e. EUR 54 407) are supported directly by providers.

<sup>38</sup> The VAE-University project received a total budget of EUR 5.6 million for the period 2008-2013. It was jointly funded by Wallonia-Brussels Federation, universities themselves, and the European Social Fund. The end of the project was planned for December 2013 however the project was funded for one more year (2014).

occupations that led to the highest number of validation sessions in 2012, the cost varied between EUR 110 and 180.<sup>39</sup>

### 9.3 Evidence of benefits to individuals

#### VDC

The main objective of the legislation on VDC is to enable citizens over the age of 18 to gain recognition for the competences they have acquired through professional experience and training and through other life experiences.

The validation of skills targets an audience with a low level of qualification. Candidates with different levels of education have very similar success rates. This indicates that the validation scheme does not replicate social asymmetries, and it is considered as a good indicator that the scheme is effective (CVDC, 2015a). Official recognition of individuals' skills is seen as beneficial in terms of their professional identity and should guarantee access to continuing education, enable the individual to manage their career path and allow them to validate their abilities within the labour market. Skills Certificates are official documents issued on behalf of the French Community, of the Walloon Region and the French Community Commission and are additionally recognised by Public Employment Services.

In 2014, a new update of the data on return to education has revealed that there are increasing opportunities for certificate holders to get exemptions when they undertake a new training pathway. For instance IFAPME started to quantify the number of people who resumed training within their organisation after obtaining one or more Certificates (CVDC, 2015a). As a result of the negotiations conducted by the Consortium with social partners, the signing of sectoral agreements is expected to increase the market value of the Skills Certificates and provide further benefits for Certificate holders for those occupations where agreements apply (see Section 2.3).

In 2012, an impact study conducted by a consulting firm (Sonecom)<sup>40</sup> on behalf of the Consortium aimed at providing a clearer picture of the actual benefits of VDC for Skills Certificate holders. Another part of the survey aimed at measuring the 'value' of certificates with companies (private and public) and the third sector.

The first strand of the survey concerned benefits to 'candidates' or the impact of the Skills Certificate in terms of professional pathway (self-esteem, employability, mobility, effectiveness and satisfaction of employment, opinion on the Skills Certificate). 400 candidates (who took part in testing sessions) were interviewed. Overall, perceptions were positive: 93 % were satisfied with the mechanism and said they would recommend the scheme.<sup>41</sup> Most importantly, after obtaining the Skills Certificate, successful candidates were more likely to go into employment or return to education, more likely to have a position corresponding to their competences, and their self-esteem had increased. The strong points of the mechanism, as reported by candidates, were the support provided, the quality of the procedure and its positive impact on labour market integration. The weak points highlighted by candidates were, first of all, the lack of recognition of the Skills Certificates, the level of the tests which was deemed too hard and the session organisation (waiting lists to pass certain sessions, timing of the sessions)<sup>42</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> Data provided in the Activity report 2012 of the Consortium. A detailed breakdown of the costs, per validation centre, is provided, p. 22. The report did not include considerations on the efficiency of the validation procedures.

<sup>40</sup> This is the only impact study existing so far. For a comprehensive presentation of the study, see Audio file with PowerPoint (FR): <http://www.uwe.be/uwe/presse/media-center/etudeimpact-titrescompetence.flv/view>

<sup>41</sup> Overall, the satisfaction level was rated 7.65 out of 10.

<sup>42</sup> The lack of recognition is a very serious issue that the Consortium has taken into account in its current and future actions. Concerning the level of the tests which was deemed too hard, this is not an issue that the Consortium is planning to address, as the tests are meant to be discriminating, in terms of identifying those who master the professional competence and those who do not. The average success rate at the test is deemed satisfactory by the Consortium.

Regarding employers, the survey focused on the impact of VDC in terms of visibility, image, the perceptions and attitudes towards the Consortium, the testing sessions and the Skills Certificate itself. 300 employers were interviewed. Overall the poor knowledge of the mechanism emerged as the main problem (only 12 % of employers declared that they were aware of VDC mechanisms), a serious issue considering that if the scheme is not known, certificates cannot be 'recognised' on the labour market.<sup>43</sup> However, a more positive indicator is that there is potential for development as 76 % of employers said they were relatively interested or very interested in the scheme; 78 % would recommend the scheme; 44 % would be ready to use the mechanism for their employees; and, 69 % would use it for recruiting new staff. Almost half of them would like further information. Most employers believe the scheme is mostly relevant for individuals without any qualification. When concerns or reservations were expressed, they were related to the fact that the validated competences would not correspond to the current needs in the corresponding occupation.

A recent development is the Consortium initiative to organise Certificate awards ceremonies, to give a more formal quality to the award of Skills Certificates. It is also an opportunity to promote the scheme and its quality assurance process (employers are invited to attend the ceremony). For example, in September 2014, the Brussels-based validation stakeholders invited successful candidates to receive their Certificate directly from the hands of the Minister for employment and vocational training in the Brussels region.<sup>44</sup>

### VAE in EPS

The rationale of VAE in EPS is to facilitate and shorten the education pathway of individuals who have not been able to complete a study pathway in their initial training (EPS is often viewed as a 'second chance'). More specifically, VAE in EPS helps to:

- Avoid the repetition of learning activities that would cover learning outcomes that are already mastered (through other training activities or professional and personal experience);
- Obtain a formal education title (certificate or degree);
- Encourage social and professional mobility (vertical and horizontal); and,
- Make sure that the assessed skills in a learning institute will get the same recognition throughout EPS.

### VAE in higher education

The objective of VAE is to improve access to higher education and increase the number of people holding a tertiary-level diploma. There are two types of benefits for individuals: first, the recognition of one's competences is a factor increasing self-esteem. Secondly, VAE is a tool for social recognition as the candidates' competences are recognised by scientific experts in one disciplinary field.

In addition, the VAE procedure itself and the application process can be a tool for reflection and self-assessment by beneficiaries.

## 9.4 Beneficiaries and users of validation processes

### 9.4.1 Validation trends

#### VDC<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> The existence of this problem is confirmed by another indicator in the candidate survey: only 20 % of candidates were asked whether they were holding a Certificate while being interviewed by employers for recruitment or during an interview with PES. However, when asked whether they were using or showing this Certificate, 44 % of candidates reported that they never use or show their Certificate.

<sup>44</sup> See <http://www.validationdescompetences.be/actualites/ceremonie-de-remise-de-titres-de-competece-ce-24-septembre-a-bruxelles>

<sup>45</sup> Data is provided by the CDVC Activity report 2015

In 2015, key figures concerning validation are the following:

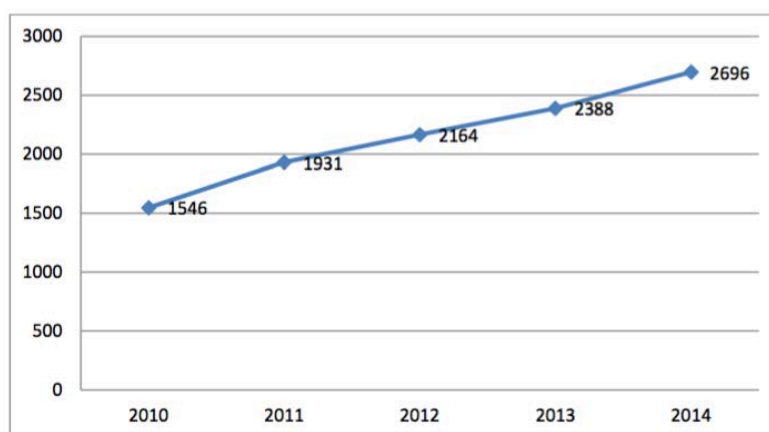
- 1 048 Skills Certificates were awarded in 2015. If one includes the process of recognition of prior learning (RAF), the number of Skills certificates issued reached 8 200 in 2015.<sup>46</sup>
- 11 837 people have obtained at least one Skills Certificate since 2010.
- 47 validation centres approved in Wallonia and Brussels.

In 2015, more than 3 606 candidates registered with a centre (75.1 % were successful), in the 47 accredited validation centres actively delivering Certificates, covering 39 occupations.<sup>47</sup> Nearly 2 648 validation sessions were organised (the target was set at 1 782)<sup>48</sup>.

The level of absenteeism was 19 % in 2015 (the level has remained fairly stable, between 18 and 20 % since 2010).

The number of Skills Certificates delivered has increased, even though the number of validation sessions has decreased slightly, thanks to an increase in the success rate (+ 2.7 %).

**Figure 9.1** Number of validation sessions, 2010-2014



(Source: CDVC, 2015a)

**Table 9.1** Number of Certificates awarded and percentage of successful candidates, 2010-2015

	Certificates awarded	Success rate (%)
2010	1 014	66.2
2011	1 300	67.4
2012	1 456	67.5
2013	1 734	72.6
<b>2014</b>	<b>1 953</b>	<b>72.4</b>

<sup>46</sup> 1 989 Skills certificates issued via the skills validation sessions in the validation centres; 6 211 Skills Certificates issued via the recognition of prior learning (RAF).

<sup>47</sup> In total there are 5 occupations covered, but in 2015 sessions were organised for 39 of them.

<sup>48</sup> Top five most validated occupations (February 2015): administrative employee, housekeeper, bookkeeper, pastry bakery worker, residential electrician.

2015	1 989	75.1
------	-------	------

Source: CDVC, 2015b

In 2015, the top 10 most validated occupations were (in number of validation sessions):

- Housekeeper: 551
- Administrative employee: 533
- Pc technician Network: 194
- Forklift driver: 123
- Residential electrician: 111
- Pastry bakery worker: 90
- House painter: 81
- Accounting assistant: 78
- Boning chopper: 78
- Technician machining system: 73

### VAE in EPS

In 2015, there were more than 160 000 learners in adult education (EPS), 125 000 at secondary level, and 35 000 at higher education level. 170 nationalities are represented among all learners (*Ministre de l'enseignement de promotion sociale, 2015*).

Steps were taken by the government in place since 2014 to improve the measurement of VAE in adult education. There was no reliable system to quantify the number of VAE and to differentiate between the types of procedures (especially between the valorisation of formal learning and valorisation of informal/non-formal learning). Since September 2015, a new coding system to input data is in place and training institutions have just started to use it. The system will be fully operational in September 2016.

The first preliminary analyses show that for the school year 2015-2016 on the date 12 February 2016, the number of registrations through VAE is about 35 000, for a total of 267 000 registrations among which 69 000 jobless. 60 % of the registrations concern validation valorisation procedures recognising non formal and informal learning (admission, exemption or achievement). The 'languages' sector is the first sector concerned by VAE (1/4 of registrations), followed by IT<sup>49</sup>.

### VAE in Universities

Data on VAE is now being collected by the newly created ARES (see Section 5).

In 2014, the available data<sup>50</sup> are the following:

- Number of candidates benefiting from support/guidance: 1 577
- Number of candidates submitting to a jury: 703
- Number of candidates registering with the University: 385

Until 2013, the VAE platform collected data on the beneficiaries in the form of statistics as well as qualitative case studies on individual pathways.

Data from the VAE platform (CIUF, 2013) indicated that from 2008 to 2012:

- 2 940 candidates benefited from guidance
- 1 900 were admitted in a university programme

Nearly 70 % were admitted in human and social science training pathways in 2012. There was a higher proportion of female candidates (55 %).

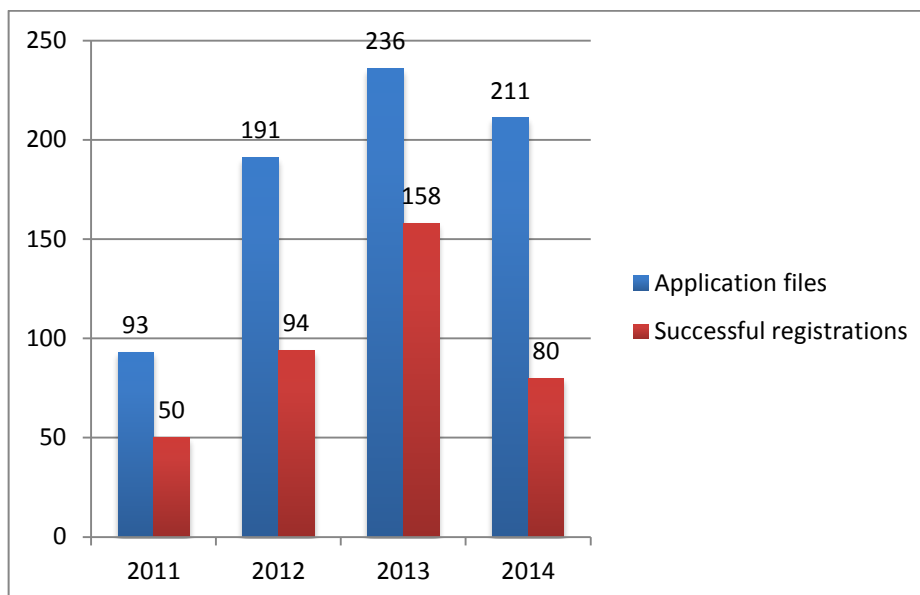
<sup>49</sup> Data collected between 1 September 2013 and 15 November 2013. Provided by EQF AG representative.

<sup>50</sup> However, such data must be considered with caution. 2014 was a transition year, several services ceased to exist while new funding was being approved.

### VAE in Hautes Ecoles

In 2014, 211 application files were submitted to a jury, resulting in 80 successful registrations with an *Haute Ecole*. Since 2011 there has been a total of 731 applications, resulting in 383 registrations.

**Figure 9.2 VAE in Hautes Ecoles, overall statistics 2011-2014**



Source: Cellule VAE inter-réseaux du Conseil Général des Hautes écoles (2014), *La Valorisation des Acquis d'Expérience en Hautes écoles en Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles. Les enjeux d'un dispositif dans le cadre de l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie*

#### 9.4.2 Validation users

##### VDC

The decree on the Validation of skills and the various strategy notes define priority groups (CVDC, 2005), in particular job seekers, temporary workers, and public service agents.

In 2015, the candidate's profile is the following:

- 41 % of candidates are women, 59 % are men;
- 64 % are unemployed;
- 75 % of candidates with a level at or below the CESS;
- 81.3 % attendance to skills validation tests;
- 26 % of applicants over 45 years;
- 77.4 % pass validation tests for 18-24 years,

This breakdown has remained fairly stable in the past years. Regarding the key criteria for the priority target group, 39 % of candidates had an education level below or equal to a CESI (certificate of lower secondary education).

In order to meet the requirements, the existing platform (VAL'ID) has been improved. As of 1 January 2015, a distinction was made among employees. It is now possible to distinguish between workers from the public sector and those from the private sector.

Efforts are made to widen the pool of potential users. The Consortium is currently testing a new online platform to make the scheme more responsive to users' needs and demands.

Since July 2015, a section of the Consortium website can be used to suggest new occupations that are not yet part of the validation process.<sup>51</sup>

The Consortium is trying to achieve a balance between opening the scheme to new occupations and attracting more users. This is in line with Plan Marshall 4.0: new occupations should be selected in the future, in particular ‘emerging’ occupations or occupations of the future. Another strategy is the validation of more specialised skills that can be transversal to several occupations. They lead to specialised skills certificates (e.g. mentoring trainees, or in house company tutor).

### Universities

Attracting unemployed candidates remains a key challenge. Among the actions planned in the framework of the VAE 2020 projects, several focus on improving access to VAE for vulnerable groups. In 2013, data indicated that this target group was under-represented among candidates, although their proportion was increasing: 18 % in 2012, against 13 % in 2011 and 9 % in 2010.

Although there are currently no statistics about the graduation rate of VAE candidates compared to regular students at the end of their study pathway, qualitative research carried out by Universities in Louvain, Liège and Brussels indicates that students who access university programmes via VAE are less likely to drop out compared with other adults returning to education, and generally obtain higher grades than other students overall.<sup>52</sup>

### Hautes Ecoles

In terms of profile, in 2013, 60 % of candidates were women, 47 % were employed (only 16 % job seekers), and 58 % had more than five years’ experience. In terms of employment status, there has only been a slight increase in the number of job seekers among candidates since 2013.

An important fact is that VAE is still mainly used by individuals who already hold a higher education degree (more than 60 %). More than 40 % of candidates aim to obtain a diploma (through VAE) of equal level to the one they are already holding (only 24 % aim for a higher diploma, 33 % for a lower level) (Agence FSE, 2014).

One assumption that can be made from such data is that **VAE candidates engage in a dynamic of horizontal mobility**, or ‘career change’ dynamic, rather than a vertical mobility aiming at accessing higher-level qualifications. Therefore, one challenge is to reach other target groups. *Hautes Ecoles* acknowledge that jobseekers who obtained admission through VAE and subsequently return to education may have specific needs and constraints.

### EPS

The data collection on users of VAE in EPS is in its testing stage for the moment. The first statistics indicate that VAE mostly concerns the recognition of language skills and the secondary level. The expert hired specifically for VAE will work on improving the methods of sharpening the figures with the Economics and Social Counsellor and the Steering Board of the EPS.

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

Data on unemployed individuals are included in the sections above.

<sup>51</sup> See: <http://www.validationdescompetences.be/demande-pour-un-metier-non-mis-en-oeuvre-par-la-validation-des-compétences>

<sup>52</sup> The retention rate of VAE candidates admitted to a university programme is a key issue. Indeed, universities are partly funded through a fixed budget, and partly through subsidies based on the number of students. However, for students admitted through VAE procedures, universities only received the corresponding funding once the student completed his/her first year.

## VDC

In 2015, the VDC Consortium participated in an event organized by the "King Baudouin Foundation" centred on the migrant public (*primo-arrivants*). A working group focused on "How to improve the employability of the migrant public through the equivalence of diplomas and validation of skills?". Moreover, to encourage the participation of migrants, the validation centres offer appropriate short remedial modules to prepare them to succeed (e.g. Belgian legislation Belgian VAT for the bookkeeper, RGIE for the installer, residential electrician, etc.).

In 2015, a pilot project was prepared with the jail of Marche-en Famenne to enable validation of skills of the prisoners held either at the beginning detention to support their recovery in training, or during detention to support their reintegration.

An experiment was also conducted in 2015 with AVIQ (agency for health and social integration)<sup>53</sup> for the administrative employee in two validation centres with the collaboration of the participating Asbl. The experiment has highlighted the need to manage the stress of the candidates and to prepare them to pass validation. A meeting of the working group stressed the desire to expand the experiment to other occupation trades (housekeeper and auto mechanic) and to a public suffering from other physical handicap. Similarly, the working group desired the expansion to other centres validation interested. The partnership agreement with AVIQ will continue in 2016.

## EPS

For the refugees and immigrants, the Government has given extra funds (24 000 periods of 50 minutes) to EPS to organise French courses and literacy (100 000 periods of 50 minutes) especially for vulnerable groups, as well as courses focusing on citizenship.

EPS has a long experience in teaching in prisons, some of it with co-funding with ESF on the REINSERT programme (about 16 500 periods of courses of 50 minutes have been organised). The prisoners willing to start courses in prison rarely possess the preliminary required skills or certificates. Therefore they ask for an informal valorisation and pass a test. They can also follow refresher courses in order to pass the test. It mainly aims at vocational trainings at lower or eventually upper secondary level. The intervention of EPS happens inside the prison but it also organises a follow up outside.

## 10 Validation methods

**Table 10.1 Overview of main methods used in the four VNFIL systems in French-Speaking Belgium**

	Identification	Documentation	Assessment
Debate			
Declarative methods			
Interview	VAE-U VAE-HE VDC VAE-EPS		
Observation			
Portfolio method		VAE-U VAE-HE  VAE-EPS	VAE-U; VAE-HE; VAE-EPS; VDC ( <i>being tested</i> )

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.aviq.be/mission.html>



	Identification	Documentation	Assessment
Presentation			VAE-HE ( <i>if insufficient evidence provided by portfolio</i> )
Simulation and evidence extracted from work			VDC; VAE-EPS ( <i>if insufficient evidence provided by portfolio</i> )
Tests and examinations			VAE-U ( <i>Exceptionally, for certain university degrees such as IT science</i> ). VAE-HE ( <i>if insufficient evidence provided by portfolio</i> ) VAE-EPS ( <i>if insufficient evidence provided by portfolio</i> )
Other (e.g. e-learning methods) – please specify			

Acronyms: VDC (*Validation of competences by the Consortium*); VAE-U (*VAE in universities*); VAE-HE (*VAE in Hautes Ecoles*); VAE-EPS (*VAE in Enseignement de Promotion Sociale*)

### VDC

The most commonly used method is the assessment of the candidate in a professional situation. Candidates are asked to demonstrate their skills in a practical fashion, in the presence of experienced professionals.

*Stages of the standard VDC procedure:*

Centre Managers appoint one examiner, one observer and one logistical manager for each validation session (based on simulation of a work situation). During the session, a professional situation is reconstructed following the Validation Reference Indicators. Candidates are asked to demonstrate their skills in a practical fashion in the presence of experienced professionals who form the panel. Their work is observed by the examiner on the basis of a standard assessment criteria sheet. The observer (representative of the profession) checks that the testing procedure is organised correctly and participates at the end of the test.

Directed by the validation centre Manager, a panel composed of the examiner and the observer deliberate on the performance of the test. Candidates are subsequently informed of the test result. Each candidate can have an interview if required and will receive, if successful, a Skills Certificate by post.<sup>54</sup> Candidates can appeal against the decision taken by the panel<sup>55</sup>. The specific steps to be taken in case of appeal are fully described on the Consortium [website](#).

### *New Developments*

Another method which is being tested is the constitution of a portfolio by the candidate. A review is currently underway on the possible hybridisation or combination of the two procedures, to meet demands concerning competences that cannot be validated by a simulation easily or in a satisfactory way (e.g. web designers); or, concerning candidates who can provide sufficient evidence that make validation sessions unnecessary (e.g. workers highly specialised in technical fields with 20 years' experience). The strategic note developed by the Consortium (2012-2014) made a commitment to pilot this type of validation

<sup>54</sup> <http://www.cvdc.be/fr/english-version/how-does-a-test-take-place.html>

<sup>55</sup> Appeals Commission to examine appeals lodged by candidates and Validation Centres.

(with the help of a consultant). LabSET (research centre on distance learning) has carried out a feasibility study on the introduction of the 'dossier' or portfolio as a complementary mode of validation.

The first pilot experiment was positive and additional experimentations are being conducted. This pragmatic approach (combining assessment methods to better address the candidates' profiles) is also encouraged by the fact that portfolio methods are used in VAE in the higher education and adult education sectors. Between 2013 and 2015, the Consortium was also involved in a Leonardo Project, where partners exchanged experiences on this approach.

However, one difficulty related to implementing the approach is the time needed to prepare the portfolio. Such an approach would be best implemented if the Consortium could establish partnerships with bodies whose main activity is to document competences (e.g. Restructuring units or Cellules de reconversion; PES; Enterprises providing social insertion schemes). Such 'skills audits' require specific competences, methods, approaches, which are not currently part of the competences or missions of validation centres. Synergy with organisations specialised in skills audits would therefore maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of the approach. Finally, the Consortium is experimenting a second approach: collective validation. A collective approach can be suited for companies where a group of employees would benefit from having their competences validated. Company managers could, with the support of the local and sector trade unions, be interested in promoting such validation for their company. The quality assurance standards developed by the Consortium will apply to collective validation. Pilot projects have already been conducted.

### VAE in EPS

Each EPS learning institute has its own procedures for introducing and examining VAE applications. Each institute determines the methodology to support and guide candidates. Criteria used to assess and validate are the learning outcomes in the pedagogical file of each unit.

Candidates wishing to be admitted to a learning unit (UE)<sup>56</sup> can do so on the basis of competences that can be established and documented via a personal portfolio (access to UE is also possible on the basis of a Skills Certificate delivered by the Consortium, or other certificates delivered by approved training providers). If the candidate cannot present a portfolio that provides sufficient evidences, s/he can pass a test that will assess whether s/he possesses the minimum competences necessary to access the learning unit.

Ultimately, the decision to grant admission, exemption or certification is taken by the study board (*Conseil des études*) in charge of each UE. The decisions of the board are sovereign and motivated in regards of the content of the pedagogical file.

### VAE in higher education

The portfolio (*dossier*) is elaborated by the candidate after an interview with a VAE counsellor. This portfolio is then handed in to the jury who will examine the application. Each higher education institution has developed its own portfolio, adapted to its own context. However, there is common basis and structure behind all of them (candidate's CV; formulation of the motivations to engage in VAE; competences acquired, etc.).

Although tools and methods vary from one university to another, all universities strive to follow a similar procedure comprising five main steps:<sup>57</sup>

- Information and reception: Applicants for VAE receive information;
- Orientation and positioning: Applicants have the possibility to explain their plans in more detail, with the help of centres of information/orientation. The competent authorities determine if the application is acceptable and valid;

<sup>56</sup> See Section 2.2. on the modular system in EPS.

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.vae-universite.be/les-etapes-de-la-vae/>

- Contractualisation: Universities commit themselves to analysing, assessing and deciding on the outcome of the application; the applicant commits to the process;
- Assessment: the jury evaluates and take a decision; and,
- Transmission of results: the jury formally transmits the results of the assessment and may offer recommendations regarding the future study programme of the applicant.

In *Hautes Ecoles*, the inter-network VAE unit had developed common VAE procedures and communication tools, for all *Hautes Ecoles*. The unit also trained VAE counsellors. As in universities, the VAE jury in *Hautes Ecoles* has full autonomy to decide which experience is relevant, with regard to the study programme in which the candidate wishes to enrol.

The steps followed are the following:

- Candidates choose a *Haute Ecole* and get information via the admission service and contact the VAE counsellor
- Candidates elaborate their VAE portfolio and submit it to the jury (two submission periods per year)
- The jury analyses the portfolio and formulates an opinion, potentially after auditioning the candidate
- A decision is taken by the *Haute Ecole*; exemption, admission, or re-direction towards another pathway, and communicated to the applicant via the VAE counsellor.

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#### Websites:

Unique portal for all types of VNFIL: <http://www.valorisermonexperience.be>

#### VDC

Validation des compétences: <http://www.validationdescompetences.be>

Consortium de la validation des compétences: <http://www.cvdc.be>

#### VAE

Académie de recherché et d'enseignement supérieur (ARES): <http://www.ares-ac.be/a-propos>

Valorisation des acquis de l'expérience en Hautes Écoles: <http://www.vae-cghe.be>

Valorisation des acquis de l'expérience in Universities <http://www.vae-universite.be>

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## 11.2 Sources

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- HEPH-Condorcet
- Expert VAE Enseignement de Promotion sociale
- Conseiller Economique et social auprès du Comité de Pilotage de l'EPS



## Country report Belgium-French

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

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

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



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