Dialogical Validation in Dutch Teacher Training

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VPL-enhanced learning strategies in the Netherlands

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In the Netherlands, Archimedes Institute at Utrecht University of Applied Sciences offers teacher education for 14 bachelor and 11 master programmes. The Institute's staff highly values education meeting the learning needs of students, for initial and for post-initial learning[192]. Making learning more flexible is considered essential in order to realize such a learner-steered approach to lifelong learning in teacher education. This calls for making use of the students' learning history in order to be able to offer each student a flexible, personal learning trajectory. Such personalised learning is based on two interrelated processes:

1. The validation process focuses on identifying, valuing, validating and advising on the further development of competencies that a person already acquired formally and informally, and will need to acquire for reaching-out to a learning objective (qualification, competence-development, personal fulfilment, etc.).
2. The learning process facilitates the student in (co-)initiating, designing and implementing flexible learning arrangements within the modular, blended learning offering of the Institute.

The organisation of education, guidance and assessment is geared to giving students the opportunity to take control of their own learning process in dialogue with the Institute's teacher-educators. With the help of this dialogue, the student can actively participate in determining the objective, tempo, method of assessment, content and form(s) of their learning trajectory. Such self-directed learning based on co-management of the learning process is the basis for personalised learning. It has validation and tailored learning as supporting pillars. Where *tailored learning* is mainly about the design, supervision and implementation of a learning trajectory, *validation* focuses on the assessment and advice on the content of the student's learning in relation to the personal learning need. Creating the right balance in the relationship between the two pillars is the essence of the dialogue between student and teacher.

The validation process relies on a portfolio-steered approach in a learning environment based on learning outcomes. The student has a variety of test methods at her[193] disposal and can achieve an intended learning objective by means of a learning-pathway dependent or a learning-pathway independent programme. The process has a dialogical character because

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192 Initial education is education people receive from the moment they become subject to compulsory education. Their further learning is termed post-initial education.
193 Wherever 'she' or 'her' is written, 'he', 'him' or 'his' can also be read.

of the continuous coordination between student and teacher about what has been learned and what still needs to be learned. The student is the owner of her personal learning experiences and ensures that these experiences are used to achieve the intended learning objective. The teacher is the owner of (the learning outcomes of) the learning offer and has the responsibility to match this offer with the learning experiences and learning needs of the student and guide the student in the learning trajectory.

In order to realise such an integrated approach to validation and learning, the concept of *dialogical validation* was presented in 2018 as one of the supporting pillars of personalised learning[194]. Dialogical validation enables the student to be co-owner of the flexible learning strategies of Archimedes. This article explains why and how this is achieved.

Validation = Learning

A broad view of the phenomenon of 'validation of prior learning' embraces all learning that takes place consciously and unconsciously, informally, formally and non-formally and above all continuously. Learning can be seen as an individual activity within social processes. Such processes cover all possible learning, working and living situations and are not necessarily intentional but always - consciously or unconsciously - enrich one's knowledge, skills and insights.

Claxton states learning '*comes in many different shapes and sizes. And these start to kick in at different stages of development. [-] learning is a much wider, richer concept than is captured within current models of education and training'[195]*. It also encompasses implicit, non-intentional learning in its holistic approach:

> *Learning is what one does to transmute incompetence into competence, ignorance into knowledge. By definition, learning starts in the zone of the unknown, and attempts, via a whole variety of activities, mental and physical, to discover comprehension and expertise.*[196]

This description supports a social-constructivist, broad and social interpretation of learning and covers both the breadth and depth of learning. Jarvis defines such learning as an activity that continues to take place throughout life, in which the continuous learning experiences of people can be actively used for the various purposes for which further learning takes place:

> *Human learning is the combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses) – experiences social situations, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person.*[197]

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194 Duvekot, R.C., Edwards, S., Grooters, N., Hoevenaars, L. en Noorlander, M. (2017). *Valideren is (te) leren. Een model voor dialogisch valideren van leeruitkomsten*. Utrecht, Instituut Archimedes.

195 Claxton, G. (1999). *Wise up: the challenge of lifelong learning.* New York/London, Bloomsbury, p.5.

196 Claxton, G., Atkinson, T., Osborn, M. & Wallace, M. (Eds.) (1996). *Liberating the Learner: Lessons for Professional Development in Education.* London, Routledge, p. 47.

197 Jarvis, P. (2009). *Learning to be a person in society*. London, Routledge, p. 25.

Jarvis' definition can be used as a basis for applying the concept of dialogical validation. People learn, partly through their personality, in different ways, by reflecting on the experiences they gain and internalising them, within a given context and by processing theoretical information. People learn consciously and unconsciously at all stages of their lives and in all areas of their lives. Each person is a learning person - '*it is the whole person who learns*' [198]- with their own learning style, motivation, experiences and ambition. Dialogical validation links up with these unique, individual learning experiences and makes the connection(s) between a person's personality, the individual context and the personal enrichment that can be achieved at a university of applied sciences.

Dialogical Validation
Linking the student's learning needs to the university's learning offer is based on validating existing learning experiences and taking these as the starting point for organising a learning cycle in which new learning outcomes are achieved at regular intervals and anchored in one's portfolio. The dialogical character of such a cycle is based on Paolo Freire's conceptions that the dialogue between student and teacher should be essentially open and equal and concerns the wish or need for design and content determination of one's (further) learning. Without openness and equality in the consultation on learning, only limited use can be made of the validation of one's previous learning to initiate meaningful and personalised learning.[199]

In Freire's view, learning - and thus validation - can be regarded as a cycle that starts with experience, which is reflected on, which then leads to a certain action and which in turn produces a concrete new experience that can be reflected on: '*Learning is a process where knowledge is presented to us, then shaped through understanding, discussion and reflection*'[200]. Such learning revolves around the experiences that people gain in specific situations within their living and working situations and which they can use as input for a dialogue with a teacher (or an employer, colleague, etc.). This dialogue motivates and enables people to (self)reflect. The right combination of experience and reflection then leads to new learning processes, which ultimately leads to the acquisition of human autonomy, after which a new future perspective emerges. Such a cycle is based on integrating validation and learning. The role of the portfolio is best used in the cycle if it is tailored to different functions within the cycle (planning, supervision and assessment), and if the portfolio fulfils a central function in the supervision and monitoring of personal development.[201]

Validation processes can vary depending on the ambition, the intended effect and the context or situation in which the student finds himself. In general, we are dealing with three main forms of generating an effect of validation:
1. Validation for <u>civil effect</u>: the student would like to achieve a civil effect (qualification); testing is then dominated by a classical approach in which a learning standard is chosen, for which a specific portfolio is then completed and assessed in order to achieve access to a learning programme.

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198 Jarvis, P. (2006). *Towards a Comprehensive Theory of Human Learning*. London, Routledge, p. 50.
199 Freire, P. (1972, 2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, Continuum.
200 Freire, P. (1998). *Teachers as cultural workers – Letters to those who dare teach*. Boulder, WP, p. 22.
201 Tartwijk, J. van en Driessen, E.W. (2009). Portfolios for assessment and learning. In: *AMEE Guide no. 45. Medical teacher, 31*, pp. 790-801.

2. Validation for <u>social effect</u>: the student chooses to strengthen certain areas of competence. This can be in the context of employability, professionalisation, integration or career (re)orientation. A portfolio format can be used, such as a personal, broad portfolio or a portfolio format more specifically aimed at specific areas of competence. The goal is to start learning (again) or to keep the level of learning up to date (initiation, upgrade or update).

3. Validation for <u>personal effect</u>: the student can also consider achieving a purely personal effect (empowerment, inclusion, personal enrichment, *enjoyability*) when entering into an assessment. This may mean, for example, that the student wishes to have a personal portfolio of personal learning experiences validated as a stand-alone, reflective assessment procedure. Then it is up to the student to use the assessment report as a driver for doing something within her framework of personal learning objectives. However, it can also stop with such a 'portfolio assessment'. If desired, this personal effect can be recorded in an official certificate with civil effect.

Dialogical validation can be defined as assessing a person's learning experiences and advising on further learning options with the purpose of achieving a desired learning effect via a personalised learning pathway. Such validation is characterised by:
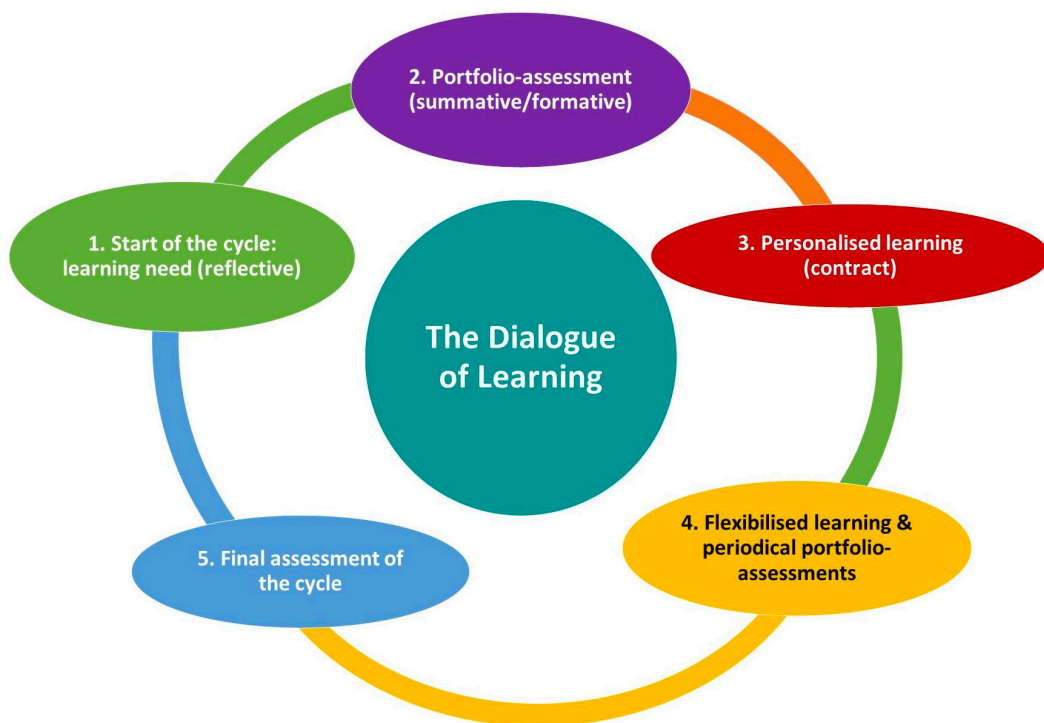
1. *Awareness:* the awareness of the student that investing in learning is useful and necessary, and that she has a learning history that can support and strengthen the purpose and direction of learning.

2. *Motivation:* the awareness of one's already available potential can be a stimulus for reaching-out to a concrete learning objective. It can even help formulate a concrete learning need or desire.

3. *Facilitation* (**affordance**): the facilities for learning, testing and supervision that are available to a student to learn (summative/formative) and to which the student has access or is entitled. Such affordance includes legislation and regulations, financing, education and training programmes, provisions for assessment and (career) guidance. For the Institute, this entails that it distinguishes itself through an assessment and learning concept that responds to a person's learning history and learning objective.

4. *Learning pathway independence*: an understanding of learning that can take place in formal, non-formal and informal contexts, regardless of time or place.

5. *Dialogue*: an open dialogue between student and teacher in which both have their input in (1) determining the learning need - form, content and meaning - of the student and (2) the subsequent design, implementation and evaluation of a personalised learning trajectory.

6. *Assessment* as an instrument to compare and value the student's learning history and the learning outcomes of the testing organisation. There are three types of assessment forms suitable for making this comparison:
   - Assessment *of* learning, in which a person's portfolio is assessed summative against a prescribed standard and can lead directly to (partial) recognition.
   - Assessment *for* learning, in which a formative development-oriented advice is generated for creating a follow-up process in which the desired learning objectives can be achieved.
   - Assessment *as* learning, which shows the reflective nature of validation. The assessment is experienced as a learning process in itself.

7. *Ownership*: the (conscious) ownership of the student's learning experiences and the reflective ability to connect them dialogically with the learning outcomes of the Institute.

8. ***Co-design***: cooperation between student and Institute about the joint development of meaning, form and content of further learning.

Cyclical process

Dialogical validation can be interpreted as a recurring cycle in which validation and learning alternate. At the end of each cycle, the result can be the starting point of a new cycle, or a separate new cycle can be started. In all cases there are successive learning cycles which are necessary and useful for the student in the context of lifelong learning design in order to maintain and improve himself in a sustainable way in the learning society (for empowerment and employability).

Figure 1: The cycle of dialogical validation and learning

The successive steps in a cycle are:

1. The focus is on the awareness of personal value and the articulation of the student's learning needs on the basis of someone's learning experiences acquired earlier by means of reflecting on their own actions. At the start of their study programme, students go through an immersion phase of 1 period (5 weeks). In this immersion, in addition to being introduced to the learning team approach, they will be guided in the creation of a portfolio with which they can demonstrate their relevant knowledge and experiences. This is the start of the process of dialogical validation. Dialogical validation can then take place in various forms, depending on the nature of the competencies to be proven.

2. Testing, assessing and advising on the articulated learning need, in order to recognise the learning outcomes already acquired (summative) and to give shape to a personalised

learning trajectory (formative). Agreements about the personal learning pathway are recorded in an *educational agreement*[202] between the student and the university (and possibly the employer).

3. Depending on the learning objective, the student receives an appropriate learning offer: recognition of someone's value (summative) by means of a portfolio assessment, in combination with a development-oriented (formative) advice on further learning for shaping a personalised learning trajectory.
   N.B. In case of the choice to only strive for recognition, the student completes the cycle with step 3 in which the personal portfolio is updated (and validated!).

4. Then the student gets formal recognition of what already has been learned and a personalised and flexible learning trajectory, designed through blended learning with periodic test moments or progress assessments. The portfolio can serve as an instrument for monitoring the student's progress and enables the communication with the guidance-facilities of the university.

5. Finally, the new, achieved learning outcomes of each learning cycle are summative assessed by means of a final assessment and anchored in the portfolio or professional competence file of the person concerned. If desired, the result of one cycle can lead to the start of a new learning cycle. In this sense, this is about managing one's lifelong learning because the result of one learning cycle generates new learning needs in a subsequent learning cycle. The learning cycle is therefore primarily a learning spiral with multiple learning cycles rather than a single, separate learning cycle.

This learning cycle can be filled-in by students in various ways. After each cycle the student can build a new cycle on the basis of an enriched portfolio and new learning wishes. This is what we call *the portfolio-loop*[203].

Flexible learning

Flexibilization of learning means that learning can be followed independently of time and place and is organised on the basis of learning outcomes. It is the result of learning (learning outcomes) that is central. Learning outcomes can be/will be achieved regardless of form, location and time. It's not about 'how' but above all about 'what' someone has learned. Flexible learning is therefore the sum of (1) validating learning outcomes already achieved and (2) learning the remaining learning outcomes through a learning pathway that fits in with a person's personal learning objective and context. By validating one's learning outcomes so far, flexible learning can therefore be directly linked to the student's learning needs, resulting in what we term as personalised learning.

The integration of personal learning experiences into the learning outcomes of an Institute's qualification is a critical success factor in making learning more flexible. This integration can be organised effectively in the dialogue between the student and the teacher. In the case of dialogical validation, the learning outcomes are fixed but the path towards them, the learning

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202 After the intake assessment, the summative results and the formative advice are processed in an educational agreement (contract) between the student and Institute Archimedes. This agreement defines the defined, personalised learning pathway in terms of planning, form and content with respect to the learning outcomes to be achieved. If an employer also has a role to play in achieving the learning result, she will also be a party to this agreement.

203 Duvekot, R.C. (2016). Leren Waarderen. Een studie van EVC en gepersonaliseerd leren. [*Valuing Learning. A study of EVC and personalised learning*] Thesis. Houten, CL3S.

path, can differ. Both parties directly involved - student and teacher - consult each other about the value of the student's portfolio and the design of her learning pathway. A range of learning pathway-independent assessment methods can be used for recognising, valuing, recognising and further developing the learning experiences that someone has already acquired.

The starting point is that with the help of various forms of assessment prior to starting up an intended learning trajectory, a portfolio drawn up by the student containing the documentation of previous learning experiences will be assessed summative so that it can be determined whether the intended learning objective has already been achieved and/or which (additional) learning trajectory is required. Such an assessment might also indicate which learning style best fits the student's further learning programming: work-based learning, distance learning, classroom-learning, etc.

During the learning process, each form of assessment contributes to enriching the student's personal portfolio and provides insight into the student's progress.

After the learning process, the final assessment of the portfolio, also containing the new learning outcomes, completes the learning-cycle and enables (in time) a new learning need that can be prepared by the student.

Therewith, in the dialogue between student and teacher, the portfolio is the starting point for achieving learning outcomes and anchoring them in the student's portfolio. These learning outcomes can be achieved through the validation process and/or the learning process. In principle, students can make continuous crossovers between validation and learning from their own portfolio, because both learning processes are based on the same learning outcomes. They are distinguished from each other by their learning pathway-independent or learning pathway-dependent character. The content and meaning of learning play an equal role in both learning paths. The difference lies in the student's ownership of the learning process: the choice of how the learning process takes shape and how the learning outcomes are documented, assessed and linked to an intended learning effect.

Within the *validation process,* the testing or assessing (summative) and advisory (formative) functions of validation in the dialogue between the student and the teacher are used to value and recognise learning outcomes. The student has various forms of testing available, enabling product- or process-oriented validation options.

The *learning process* aims at offering learning that cannot be realised through validation or that the student believes is desirable. This offer is personalised in terms of content, form and meaning. The student has a say in the design of the personal learning pathway within the legal and educational framework of the study programme and/or the domain within which the student learns.

Perspectives

Dialogical validation provides space for answering the students' learning needs and strategies. It enables the student to express a concrete learning need that can either result in a direct return on personal learning experiences or - more indirectly - can lead to a flexible and personalised learning trajectory. Since dialogical validation in the form of '*assessment as learning*' is a learning process in itself, it is an integral part of personalised learning. In this light, the perspectives of dialogical validation can be described as follows:

- Dialogical validation can be used in a wide range of applications in the context of lifelong learning policies, personal empowerment and inclusion strategies and career development steps, for different target groups and at different cognitive levels. Since organisations generally operate with different target groups that also operate at different levels, dialogical validation presents itself as a broadly applicable concept for pursuing learning objectives for any target group or level.
- An important factor in the exploitation of dialogical validation is the savings that it can help achieve in terms of investment in time and money in the practice of personal career development or - at the organisational level - of personnel policy, both for normative and for development-oriented policies.
- Extrinsic factors can lead to the use of dialogical validation in activities aimed at personal career development and personnel policy. This may, for example, involve quality requirements set by the legislator with regard to the personnel working in a particular sector. These requirements can be general requirements such as having a relevant diploma at higher education level. Specific requirements may also be set, for example with regard to safety procedures in production processes. In such cases, the use of dialogical validation can be the catch-up that the professional or organisation has to make in order to meet the new requirements.
- Intrinsic factors can also be a strong promoter of dialogical validation in personal career development and personnel policy. The motivation for this can come from both the employer and lead to the facilitation of validation applications in terms of time and money for employees. From the student's point of view, personal initiative can also lead to gaining access to a personalised learning trajectory.
- The use of dialogical validation for 'from-work-to-work policy', in social or job-seekers programmes, can be supportive ion achieving more efficiently a good match between the supply and demand of a person's skills and qualifications on the labour market.
- The process of dialogical validation stands and falls with the way in which the personalised portfolio is prepared, used and, in view of the recurring character of the cycle in figure 1, can actually generate a recurring effect on the lifelong learning process of a student. Practical examples show that the information and guidance of candidates for dialogical validation is crucial, particularly in the phase in which the portfolio is made. After all, the portfolio is the input that the learner provides for the assessment and the basic material on which she bases her personal learning needs. In the assessment, the valuation takes place, which then determines the type of recognition that is required from a personal or organisational perspective.

Critical success factors

One of the tricky aspects of dialogical validation is the design of test forms that do justice to the complexity of assessing and advising on personal learning experiences and at the same time are selective and diagnostic in nature and achievable in terms of time, money and concrete learning effect. A number of critical success factors can be concretely identified:

1. *Awareness of* the value of dialogical validation, in which the learner is central, requires broad support. Awareness is needed to want to invest in portfolio formation on the one hand and in dialogical validation on the other. Acceptance of each other's roles and responsibilities (ownership) is important in this respect in order to make validation a real dialogue. It is also important to recognise that the validation function is integrated into

the learning cycle. Validation is also learning, so to speak, albeit independent of the learning path!

2. The way in which the content of the learning offer is translated into concrete and recognisable *learning outcomes*. This says a lot about the way in which dialogical validation on the basis of a student's learning need can be linked to a personal learning arrangement.

3. The *portfolio* as the carrier of the dialogical validation and the personal learning arrangement. The portfolio is a powerful form to give form and substance to the student's ownership of learning. Facilitation from the university can give a welcome boost in this direction by offering:
   a. A portfolio training aimed at self-management of competences. This is a useful tool to start the desired portfolio formation and to organise self-reflection on one's own knowledge and ability.
   b. Portfolio guidance as an accessible source of information for helping to set up a person's portfolio is of great value for actually creating a portfolio.
   c. Self-assessment instruments to help determine, for example, the level of competence and ambition. This can be important in determining the purpose and direction of an intended, personalised learning pathway.

4. The *professionalisation of* the university staff in managing and exploiting dialogical validation. This mainly concerns learning to deal with new forms of testing and new roles as teacher, such as coach, portfolio supervisor and assessor. The main aim is to be able to listen to each other in the dialogue between students and teachers in order to create an effective balance between the need for and supply of learning. The feasibility of test forms and portfolio methodology also falls under the heading of professionalisation. Trusting the quality of the assessor is one of the main issues in this context.

5. *Assessment* has four main forms: self-assessment, assessment of learning, assessment for learning and assessment as learning. All forms can be integrated into an institute's personalised learning concept. They all enrich the creation of a valuable connection with the student.

6. The *ownership* within the dialogical validation must be clear:
   a. The student is responsible for the self-management of competencies and the construction and management of the portfolio. The portfolio is the basis for the construction of personalised learning trajectories.
   b. The university manages the qualification standards and must be able to respond to a student's learning need, i.e. be able to offer customised learning options and supervise the student's self-learning ability. A university is also responsible for drawing up the contract between the student and the university (and possibly the employer).
   c. The organisation for which the learner works has the responsibility to articulate the competence need of the organisation and to facilitate investment in the student.

7. For *flexible learning arrangements,* not only the content but also the form in which the learning takes place is important. This includes (1) blended learning for the design and (2) flexible, personalised learning arrangements for the content. Form and content are based on learning outcomes.

8. *Quality assurance* of portfolio-assessments and personalised learning trajectories is needed for creating trust in the ways of working of dialogical validation and accounting for the outcomes of both validating of personal learning experiences and learning the further or desired learning outcomes. The trust in the quality of the assessor should be

equal to the trust in the teacher (which in practice at the Institute are the same professionals).

9. *Monitoring and action research* are needed into practical examples, approach, methodology and effects of dialogical validation in combination with personalised learning. The outcome of such monitoring and research is aimed at learning to use both phenomena as a separate process and in combination with each other in the context of lifelong learning strategies.

In conclusion

Continuous development of the individual learner (goal) is paramount with lifelong (informal and formal) learning as a motor (means). Dialogical validation connects goal and means and can be effectively used by the citizen in determining choices regarding learning and working. In the case of teacher education, dialogical validation is based on the dialogue between 'learner' and 'teacher'. This dialogue generates a validation of personal learning experiences and a further learning advice. This dialogue has a holistic character in which portfolio management and assessment methods focus on summative and formative as well as reflective validation of a person's generic qualities in order to create and strengthen a personal learning strategy.

Within the dynamics of validation and learning the utilisation of the concept of dialogical validation therewith aims at making a difference when it comes to shaping and preparing students for their functioning in the changing (learning) society. More specifically: the aim is to recognise and validate generic, personal qualities for the purpose of personalizing learning and career development in the lifelong learning arena.