

From diploma to portfolio

Validation of Prior Learning as a change maker in 'the learning society'

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Summary

Modern society is a 'learning society' where learning throughout life is important for everyone: individuals, organisations, schools and institutions. Linking people's learning experiences to practical usage on the labour market and in the civil society and in the meantime dealing with the changes in prevailing attitudes on learning, are important themes in the present transition to such a society.

This transition is characterised in this contribution as *the transition from diploma to portfolio*. The emphasis on the importance of learning of, by and for the individual is paramount, while at the same time the distribution of roles and responsibilities between the learning system, social system and individuals is changing. The *diploma* represents the more traditional, top-down hierarchical approach to learning, while the *portfolio* represents a more bottom-up steered approach, partly because the learning process is steered more effectively personally by the individual learner and the learning and social systems are slowly adapting to this new situation. This contribution focuses on the question how to utilize the systematics of Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) as an effective instrument for the sake of personalizing learning in 'the learning society'?

Introduction¹

In modern society the systems of training and education need to be adjusted and innovated in the light of the changing socio-economic and socio-cultural landscape. A qualification used to be enough to get access to a structural job on the labour market. But this certainty more and more no longer holds. Nowadays the need is growing for everybody to focus on flexible, continuous and more adaptive learning to keep oneself employable. This goes for all social partners involved: individuals, trade unions, schools, universities, employers, legislative and regulatory bodies. These individuals, organisations and stakeholders are all tied together in the social and economic structure. These ties have always been present, but never before in history the individual was actively part of the design for flexibilising learning and working grounds in modern society (Delors, 1996; Hargreaves, 2004; Duvekot, 2006). Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) offers this 'opportunity' to the individual since it focuses especially on someone's personal learning results so far for the sake of showing someone how to stay tuned-in to social and economic opportunities.

VPL is the instrumentation for recognizing and valuing what people have learned so far and linking these learning experiences to further development steps for someone in her² own context. The main driver for VPL is embedded in the learning and working processes in which the individual is engaged. So, VPL is more or less anchored in someone's learning and working history and future.

In this perspective, VPL is not designed to highlight the lack of competences but precisely the opposite – to take stock of existing competences; in other words, rather than being half empty, VPL takes the view that 'someone's glass is already half filled' (Wg EVC, 2000). The main question for this contribution therefore is how to utilize the systematics of Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) as an effective instrument for the sake of personalizing learning in 'the learning society'?

VPL covers the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders and actors in the lifelong learning-arena. It links the learning needs of the individual, the facilities from the learning system and the demand for competent people in society. In this arena learning is supposed to be established in an open dialogue between the main actors in lifelong learning: teachers, employers and learners. These three actors represent symbolically the main dialogues on learning that are needed in order to create and uphold the benefits of lifelong learning for all. The steering role of the learner herself is the new feature in this process because it gives a voice to the learner. Never before in history this voice was facilitated in a way that learner's ownership of her own learning could be grounded in learning strategies! With VPL the situation Paulo Freire already wrote about in the 1970s can finally be established in which learning as a personal and social process makes sense '*because women and men learn that through learning they can make and remake themselves, because women and men are able to take responsibility for themselves as beings capable of knowing — of knowing that they know and knowing that they don't.*' (Freire, 2004, p. 15).

The learning society

The concept of 'the learning society' originated in the period of economic growth of the 1960/70s. In this era there was a growing need for skilled labour. This led to more attention in national policies on the role of education in managing the rise in 'social and economic wealth'. Education was equated with lifelong learning and a significant and relevant means of transforming social and political life for this purpose (Gelpi, 1985; Hobsbawm, 1994). This called for a learning society built on the notions that learning is important and valuable and that all people need to invest continuously in their potential. The added value of VPL in this was that it enables the learners to (1) take into account their prior learning achievements and (2) create a personalised lifelong learning strategy when reflecting on these prior learning outcomes. This focus on learning – in those days one spoke in general about 'education' when actually addressing all forms of learning inside and outside of the formal education system - was articulated by the UNESCO in 1972 as follows:

The aim of education is to enable man to be himself, to become himself. And the aim of education in relation to employment and economic progress should be not so much to prepare young people and adults for a specific, lifetime vocation, as to 'optimise' mobility among the professions and afford permanent stimulus to

1 This contribution is based on: Duvekot, R.C. (2016) *Leren Waarderen. Een studie van EVC en gepersonaliseerd leren. Proefschrift. [Valuing Learning. A study of the Validation of Prior Learning and personalised learning. Thesis]*. Houten: CL3S. It is published in: Novotný, P. and Sava, S. (Eds). (2016). *Research in Adult Learning and Education: The European Dimension*. Firenze, FUP.

2 Whenever there is mentioning of 'she' or 'her', this also means 'he', 'his' or 'him'. 😊

the desire to learn and to train oneself. (-) If learning involves all of one's life, in the sense of both time-span and diversity, and all of society, including its social and economic as well as its educational resources, then we must go even further than the necessary overhaul of 'educational systems' until we reach the stage of a learning society. For these are the true proportions of the challenge education will be facing in the future. (Faure, et al, 1972, p. xxxiii).

UNESCO's statement led to a debate on the challenges facing the modern learning society to us all and led to a set of principles showing the ground floor of *the learning society*:

1. there's more to learning than just education,
2. lifelong learning is a necessity since an initial qualification isn't a structural guarantee for a career,
3. acquiring competences isn't restricted to formal learning but also entails informal learning and non-formal learning; all these forms of learning have to be considered as valuable learning,
4. society can be seen as a social and economic structure in which learners all have a learning attitude, implicitly and/or explicitly, and in which learners have to take up their responsibility in this too, lifelong.

(Schon, 1973; Husén, 1974; Delors, 1996; Edwards, 1997; Jarvis, 2008)

In this learning society VPL acts as an important building block for creating and facilitating lifelong learning. VPL operationalizes bottom-up steered learning-processes by individual learners in their own context. Therewith VPL opens up actual learner-steered learning perspectives. VPL steers people's empowerment with its focus on the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one's life. This implies control over resources and decisions and focuses on the voice of the people when they start participating and negotiating with the other actors in the learning arena on the why, how and what of further learning (Narayan, 2005). Such empowerment challenges the existing education system and demands the design of learning-made-to-measure in different settings and for different purposes. This is the kind of empowered or personalised learning that Giddens and Beck described as being *reflexive learning* (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992). With 'reflexive' they meant the requirement placed upon individuals and institutions to reflect upon what they know in order to make their choices about who they are and how they behave. Giddens linked this to a concept of 'reflexive modernity', reasoning that over time, society becomes increasingly more self-aware, reflective, and hence reflexive with lifelong learning as a key characteristic of modernity that grounds meaning and identity in 'the self' (the individual) as the primary change agent in society. In this concept of reflexivity, VPL supports the positioning of 'the self' as co-designer of learning process.

These thoughts build strongly on Paolo Freire's ideas on learning as a developmental and dialogical process of action-reflection-praxis of and by people –especially teachers and learners (Freire, 1970). It is also the kind of learning that fits well into societal development as one of the so-called instrumental freedoms that contribute, directly or indirectly, to the overall freedom that people have to be able to live the way they would like to live (Sen, 1999). 'Social opportunities' refer in this sphere to facilities in society like education, health care and so on which influence the individual's freedom to live a better life. These facilities are not only for the sake of private lives but also of great value to participation in social, economic and political activities. Learning affects people's private as well their public lives. Therefore, it is vital for people to have access to all forms and phases of learning in order to shape their own destiny also on their own (or to a certain level). It's in such a dynamic society where the potential of VPL can help assist creating learning opportunities for all in an open dialogue between all actors involved and on equal footing.

VPL and the three learning modes

The development of VPL is best understood as a shift from an institutionalised learning system with uniform learning paths to a flexible system characterized by blended and more personal steered learning (Dukekot, *et al*, 2007). This can also be referred to as 'personalised learning' or the tailoring of pedagogy, curriculum and learning support to meet the needs and aspirations of individual learners (Hargreaves, 2004-2006). The same development can be seen on the labour market where the functioning of workers is focused more on facilitating their further learning on their own demand (bottom-up steered) instead of traditional controlling and instructing the labour force top-down. In this sense VPL is more supportive of democratising learning and working and enhancing the reflexive character of learning. See appendix 1 for a list of terms linked to VPL.

The main drivers of VPL are firstly the acknowledgement that initial training for a career no longer suffices. Secondly it is important to accept that competences (knowledge, skills, attitude, aspirations) are constantly developed. Thirdly one needs to recognize that everybody always and everywhere - consciously and unconsciously – learns by means of:

- *formal learning*, which occurs in an organised and structured context (in a school/training centre or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Formal learning is intentional from the learner’s point of view. It typically leads to qualification or certification.
- *Non-formal learning*, which is learning embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) but with an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner’s point of view. It typically does not lead to certification.
- *Informal learning*, which results from daily work-related, family or leisure activities. It is not organised or structured (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner’s perspective. It typically does not lead to certification. (Cedefop, 2009)

To be able to recognize these forms of learning, two questions are relevant: (1) is the learning intentional and (2) is it programmed as a learning activity? These questions can be captured in the following matrix:

Learning is intentional	→ ↓		
Activity is planned & programmed as a learning activity		Yes: Learning is intentional	No: Learning is not intentional
Yes: the activity has one or more learning goals		<i>Formal Learning</i>	-
No: the activity has no learning goals		<i>Non-formal Learning</i>	<i>Informal Learning</i>

Source: Werquin, 2007.

In linking the competences acquired in these three modes of learning, a learner might be able to design a personal development path that fits with one's learning style and is in line with his working or social context.

Goals and objectives

Lifelong learning is about *valuing learning*. This entails the dual perspective of valuing *the learning* constantly taking place on the one hand and learning *the valuing* on the other hand for stimulating and developing learning processes. VPL is in this respect not just strengthening learning strategies but also a tool for designing these strategies. Evidence of this duality comes from various research projects all over the world (OECD, 2012; EU, 2014; Singh, 2015; ILO, 2015). The many cases and good practices found in many global contexts supported the notion that Validation of Prior Learning is as much an organising principle of learning as a learning process in itself. Society changes into a world in which the learner gets a say in designing her own learning strategy. The main features of this transition can be reflected on different spheres with each their own rationale:

Figure 1: Levels and rationale for the transition to ‘the learning society’		
	<i>Sphere</i>	<i>Rationale</i>
1	Economical	Getting and/or keeping a job (employability)
2	Social	Aiming at motivation, reintegration, self-management of competences and personal development (empowerment).
3	Educational	Aiming at qualification, updating, upgrading or portfolio-enrichment by means of creating output-oriented standards focusing on learning outcomes and learning made to measure.
4	Participation	The civil society, aiming at social activation, voluntary activities, societal awareness & reintegration and citizenship (activating citizenship).
5	Political	On the macro-level, authorities and social partners are responsible for organising the match between these levels by means of legislation, regulations, labour agreements, fiscal policy, training funds, etc.

Source: Duvekot, Schuur and Paulusse, 2005.

Valuing learning reflects a major change in the organisation of learning processes in which the individual learner can take more responsibilities for her personal learning process. This means the individual learner changes the existing 'balance of power' in learning processes because he/she will be steering lifelong learning too with building up a personal portfolio containing documentation and reflection on the learning outcomes achieved so far in formal, informal and non-formal learning environments. In such a portfolio, learning outcomes are documented together with relevant evidence. Such portfolios create a new balance in society's learning system and - above all - show a different road-map for personal development than schools, universities, organisations, etc. were accustomed to.

When linking personal learning objectives to the objectives of other actors and stakeholders in society one can see a diversity in the ways learning gives meaning to the role of an actor in the learning arena. This is shown in figure 2.

Figure 2: Actors and their learning objectives	
<i>Individual</i>	Stimulating self-investment in learning; showing learning outcomes; building up a learning biography or portfolio
<i>Organisation</i>	Building up competence management and facilitating employees' self-investment and articulation of competences; designing lifelong learning strategies in Human Resource Management
<i>VET/HE</i>	Matching learning to real learning needs; offering learning-made-to-measure; focus on learning outcomes; facilitating lifelong learning strategies
<i>Civil Society</i>	Activating citizenship; transparency of learning outcomes in the civil society; linkages with other perspectives (qualification, careers)
<i>Macro-level</i>	Concerns policies of governments and social partners and their responsibilities for creating favourable conditions for lifelong learning through laws and regulations

Source: Duvekot, et al, 2007.

Preconditions for utilising VPL for the benefit of all actors involved are:

1. a transparent, flexible and output-oriented learning infrastructure.
2. a quality-system based on trust by (a) the judgement of the existing assessment processes used in education and (b) professional trained assessors and guides for assisting in VPL-processes.
3. A focus on learning outcomes that allows mobility and validation of prior learning outcomes, both intra- as well as inter-sector.
4. Interchangeable procedures and reports on the assessment of portfolios.
5. Creating possibilities for developing and executing blended learning solutions.
6. Public and private funding for personalised learning plans.
7. Raising awareness on the potential value of one's prior learning outcomes by telling about 'good practices'.
8. An individual right on portfolio-assessment and career-advice.

Competence and approaches

Competence is a crucial concept in VPL because it addressed and fills in the kind of learning outcomes that are assessable in a VPL-procedure. Competence entails having adequate knowledge of how to act in a particular situation. Whether or not someone is competent becomes apparent based on how she acts (Lyotard, 1988). In other words, a competence is the sum of knowledge and skill: knowledge is 'the knowing' and skill is 'the acting'. A competence, then, encompasses knowledge and skill as well as the personal methods used in applying that skill. It is essentially based on personal attitudes and ambitions. This conceptualisation is captured accurately by Cedefop's definition, stating that a competence is an ability that extends beyond the possession of knowledge and skills. It includes: 1) cognitive competence; 2) functional competence; 3) personal competence; and 4) ethical competence (www.cedefop.gr). The 'personal competence' is valuable in that it colours the generic description of a competence. Also see appendix 2 on the concept of competence.

With this competence-concept in mind, VPL facilitates someone in making an inventory of her competences, identifying them and validating them first of all personally and secondly using them to link in to a vocational or occupational standard. This linking-step is also known as a *summative* VPL approach. However, when VPL also stimulates further learning, this is called *formative* VPL. These are the two main approaches of VPL.

Preconditional for both approaches is that they both best be based on personal reflection on the potential

value of one's learning outcomes. This self-evaluation precedes a VPL-process that aims at linking someone's learning outcomes to any kind of social, economic or educational standard. To summarise these approaches:

1. **Reflective VPL** is preconditional for any VPL-approach as it takes one's entire learning biography as the focus for building up a portfolio and a personal action plan. It is not obligatory to pursue but if this precondition is met, the individual can make an accountable choice on taking specific actions: which standard to link to, which actors to address, which learning goal, etc. A high level of (social) reflexivity can be defined by an individual shaping his/her own norms, desires and objectives. It refers to the notion of the autonomy of the individual (Sen, 1999). Personal reflection on someone's prior learning experiences is like a learning process; it is assessment **as** learning.
2. **Summative VPL** is about building up a portfolio against a pre-set qualification or occupational standard, with a one-dimensional goal: looking for access to a qualification/occupation and exemptions on the basis of a retrospective analyses of the value of one's prior learning outcomes. Its main objective is the assessment **of** learning.
3. **Formative VPL**: meeting up with a portfolio to a qualification or occupational standard for deciding on what/where/how to learn further. The outcome is geared at designing a tailor-made learning programme for someone's desire to focus on one or more rationales of the learning society. Its main objective is the assessment **for** learning.

From portfolio to portfolio-loop

The portfolio is an important requirement for utilising VPL. A portfolio is used to plan, organize and document all kinds of personal learning outcomes, formally, informally and non-formally acquired. People can use a portfolio to link their prior learning outcomes to qualifications, occupational standard, social standards, redress, inclusion, to get a job or a higher salary, show transferable skills, track personal development or more holistically, answer the question who one is and what one's ambitions are in life.

There are three main forms of portfolios:

1. A dossierportfolio documents proof for getting exemptions in a qualification programme. Evidence of learning can be constituted on the basis of professional products and behaviour results. This is a portfolio that acts as a showcase for summative impact. It is only filled with the necessary proof and is hardly steered by the candidate.
2. A development-portfolio focuses on broad, personal reflection. Its nature is reflective. It is filled with relevant, lifewide proof of the one's learning achievements. Its nature is diagnostic for especially formative development purposes. It is strongly steered and managed by the individual (Tillema, 2001).
3. A personal portfolio also aims at documenting any kind of personal learning results. It can be used for any VPL-procedure and is highly (self-)reflective. The individual first fills in the portfolio with descriptions of all activities and achievements so far. It contains for each learning result a description of the personal competences that were necessary in the activity. This self-reflection can be strengthened by reflection from 'third parties'. The outcome of this process is a personal portfolio providing answers to personal questions like 'what are my strengths and weaknesses?', 'what are my core-competences?', 'what can my ambition be in life?', etc. Based on this self-reflection a personal action plan can be drawn and a decision made for a specific developmental goal. Such a personal portfolio has a holistic character since it covers a person's lifewide experiences regardless of external standards.

In appendix 3 a general portfolio-format is presented for including all kinds of documented learning experiences that are valuable to people. The format situates these experiences and describes them in terms of personal key competences that can be acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts. Such a portfolio can be taken as a starting point for addressing learning issues and can be utilised in any of the forms described above.

The VPL-process always begins and ends with someone's portfolio since new learning results will be added to the original portfolio. This enriched portfolio might at the same time be the basis for new development steps and the start of a new learning process through renewed reflection on one's learning. This is called a "portfolio-loop" (Duvekot, 2006 & 2016).

The VPL-process

The process of Validation of Prior Learning manages the principle of ‘Valuing Learning’. Building further on this principle, VPL strengthens the role of the individual in shaping his or her lifelong learning. It can demonstrate the benefits of one’s learning in terms of profit (status, money), efficiency (time, customisation), and enjoyment. The learning-programme-independent nature of the assessment enhances the effects that VPL can create for personal objectives in terms of qualifications, career development and personal meaning.

VPL is in most cases a process of five consecutive phase (Duvekot, 2016):

1. *Engagement* focuses on being aware that someone has already acquired many formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences that might be valuable. A person can exploit these competences through self-management. A wide range of aspirations may be achievable thanks to a person’s experience, and can therefore be deployed to determine an individual learning objective. Such learning objectives range from activation in the person’s private life, empowerment, personal development and career development in education and occupation to creating flexibility and mobility in order to access or move up the job market.
2. *Recognition and documentation* are focused on identifying and organising actual individual learning experience and translating these into personal competences. The description of these competences is then recorded in a portfolio. In addition to this description of the competences acquired through paid and voluntary work, qualifications, leisure activities, etc., the portfolio is supplemented with evidence backing this up, such as certificates, job reviews, references, documents, videos or pictures which substantiate the claim of possessing certain competences.
3. Under *assessment*, the contents of the portfolio are assessed and evaluated. Assessors compare the competences of an individual with a selected yardstick that is used as a reference for the intended learning objective. Depending on the yardstick used, this comparison is used to draw up an advisory opinion on possible validation at personal, organisational, sector or national level in the form of certification, career advice or personal valuation. The advice is based on the output or learning benefits to be validated, and presented by the individual at the assessment. This output is used as a basis for drawing up advice on how somebody can cash in on his or her development, and subsequent steps.
4. The *results* of VPL are focused on validating the assessment advice in terms of cashing in (direct results), possibly in combination with designing specific learning packages and/or work packages (indirect results). In the context of ‘learning’, a benefit could be the formal acquisition of exemptions or an entire qualification. In the context of ‘work’, it might involve being allocated a particular job, a promotion or a horizontal (same job level) or vertical (another job level) move. Finally, the benefit may also be something more personal, such as creating a personal profile, self-empowerment, or a vision on personal development. Benefits may create direct or indirect effects. The difference can be described as a cashing-in effect or development-orientated effect.
5. The last phase of the VPL process is *anchoring VPL*, or structural implementation, of VPL in all areas of the individual’s life. The results of an VPL approach may have a structural effect on the personal and social organisation and orientation of all actors. At an individual level, the anchoring of VPL is strongly related to the relevant context. Anchoring is also possible at an organisational level, especially if the organisation wants to be able to use VPL structurally for specific purposes in the context of human resources and learning strategies.

This VPL-process offers an outlook to personal learning strategies in which the organisation-context and learning services are crucial for keeping up with the speed of individual competence-development. The five abovementioned phases take in total ten process steps as shown in figure 3.

Figure 3: the process of ‘Validation of Prior Learning’		
Phase	Step + question	Action individual
I. Engagement	1. awareness <i>Where and how did I learn so far?</i> <i>Which necessity is there for self-investment?</i>	Open mind to lifelong learning. Inventory of personal learning wishes. Start self-management of competences.

	2. setting targets <i>Which learning targets are relevant?</i>	Self-assessment. Personal SWOT-analysis. Formulate learning targets.
II. Recognition & documentation	3. setting a personal profile <i>how to determine the need for competences?</i>	Writing a personal profile. Choosing a portfolio-format.
	4. retrospection <i>how to describe and document learning outcomes/prior learning?</i>	Filling in a portfolio. If needed, portfolio-guidance.
III. Assessment	5. standard setting <i>what is the relevant standard related to the targets?</i>	Choosing a standard to refer to. Re-arranging the personal portfolio. Self-assessment. Inventory of career-opportunities.
	6. valuation <i>How to get valued?</i>	Valuation of the portfolio. Getting advice on certification- and career opportunities.
	7. validation <i>How to get validated?</i>	Turning the advice into proper certification and career-evaluation.
IV. Results	8. prospection <i>How to set up a personal development plan (PDP)?</i>	Turning validation into a PDP for reasons of certification, employability, empowerment. Arranging learning-made-to-measure.
	9. implementing a PDP <i>Working on learning targets</i>	Executing the PDP.
V. Anchoring VPL	10. Structural implementation & empowerment <i>How did it go? If ok, how to embed VPL structurally in a personal lifelong learning strategy?</i>	Evaluation of the process. Maintaining portfolio-documentation.

Source: Duvekot, 2016.

In the figure a few elements are crucial:

- Raising awareness** of the potential of personal learning results for individuals is the heart of the process of validating prior learning outcomes. Without this, any further learning strategy cannot effectively be based on individual talents nor will it start because it will lack personal ambition.
- The portfolio** is *the red thread* in the process. When the portfolio is designed and built-up, its content can be assessed and an advice added on possible qualification- and/or career-steps; it is subsequently enriched by tailor-made or blended learning options and finally when new learning results were achieved, updated. Therewith, the portfolio is both the starting as well as the end point of individual learning processes. Any end point however may again be the starting point of a new learning process. This is called a *portfolio-loop*.
- Self-assessment** is a vital step because this strengthens her ownership of the learning results acquired so far and will stimulate her 'drive' towards co-designing her new personal development steps. There are various methods available for self-assessment, such as the Swiss *CH-Q* instrument (Schuur, *et al*, 2003). This is an structured training scheme building up a portfolio, (self-) assessment, career- & action-planning, quality-control and articulation of specific learning needs.
- Reliable **assessment** is about bridgebuilding between a portfolio and the specific development steps. In any given context, assessment has three main functions: (1) raising levels of achievement, (2) measuring this achievement reliably and (3) organising the assessment cost-effectively. Assessment in this context is the judgement of evidence submitted for a specific purpose. It requires input - proof of learning outcomes by the individual - and a standard scale for the expected output of the

assessment (Ecclestone, 1994). Proof is provided with the portfolio of the candidate. Proof of competence can be demonstrated by means of showing the 'professional products' of someone in Critical Professional Practices (CPP). CPPs are practices in which the professional faces a professional problem of dilemma. Such practices occur on all professional levels and can result in 'professional products' that can prove acquired competence(s). An example is someone in her leisure time designing a marketing-plan for a local sports club while at the same time working at a company in an administrative function. Job-hopping towards the marketing- and sales department could be an option for this employee.

The standard – could be a qualification or an occupational standard - someone wants to be assessed, depends on the specific learning objective. The assessor has to be independent and flexible with regard to the individual input and the learning objectives in order to be able to provide a personalised learning advice as the outcome of the assessment. Moreover, the assessor needs to be an expert in the field(s) of learning where the individual needs or wants to be assessed in. Criterion Based Interviewing (CBI) is a style of interviewing often used to evaluate a candidate's competence, particularly when it is hard to select on the basis of technical merit: for example, for a particular graduate scheme or graduate job where relevant experience is less important or not required.

4. To guarantee 'quality' of the assessor on the one hand and prevent a quality control-bureaucracy on the other hand, it is recommended to formulate a quality-proof validation-process by securing the quality of the assessor(s). This entails:
 - an assessor should fill in a personal portfolio herself as well.
 - A professional register for assessors should guarantee their expertise and competences.
 - Every year an assessor needs to be re-accredited by means of refresher and updating courses and at least performing ten times a year as an assessor. This new accreditation could be carried out by an official national agency.
 - The quality of assessors implies being able to refer to a standard for assessors: this standard needs accreditation and linked to a national qualification framework.
5. Regarding the **development-steps** VPL calls for a clear responsibility of not only qualification-systems but also from human resource systems.
6. Proper **evaluation** and **feedback** is necessary to structurally embed the process into personal behaviour and therewith linking outcomes of VPL processes to lifelong learning strategies that matter to all actors in the process: the learner, the organisation where the learner is active and the school/university where the learner can learn further and/or be upskilled, upgraded and developed.

VPL and personalised learning

VPL is a system which, independent of the type of learning programme, focuses on recognising, valuing, validating and developing the competences that someone has previously learned in any type of learning environment. Personalised learning can be defined as a dynamic learning concept focused on the individual learner, which can (help) initiate and establish tailored individual learning programmes in a learning culture based on self-driven, flexible, formative lifelong learning.

While VPL identifies the potential value of a person's learning, personalised learning presupposes that VPL can support somebody's contribution to the dialogue with other actors – teacher/trainer and manager/leader - in the learning arena on the meaning, form and content of learning. As a result, an important distinction between the two phenomena arises from the management of learning and the links that can be made between actors when engaging in actual lifelong learning:

- VPL mainly functions as a context-driven process, and is geared to connecting actors during learning (acquisition), and formulating the contributions of the actors involved in this process (participation). Acquisition in participation is key to VPL.
- Personalised learning can be viewed as a process driven by an individual. It focuses on making a personal contribution to achieve development goals. Participating in acquisition is key to personalised learning.

Therewith, VPL and personalised learning are closely linked. Both concern learning processes which allow individual learners to allocate themselves an active role within the 'learning society' when it comes to achieving personal, civil and/or social effects. Civil effect means achieving a learning outcome in the context of a particular qualification standard within the education system. Social effect is focused on results which are relevant to job profiles, targets, participation goals, or assignments. Personal impact may mean achieving empowerment, career and study orientation or personal development.

The cornerstones of personalised learning

Personalised learning provides flexibility for personal learning experiences, expertise, responsibilities and autonomy, and provides the individual learner with enriching and durable management and support of his or her individual developing power in a situation of control or joint control and ownership in dialogue with other actors. Below, I distinguish five pillars on which personalised learning is based (Duvekot, 2016). These pillars are the outcome of an analysis of current theorising on the challenge to personalise learning (see Billett, 2002a, 2002b; Bray & McClaskey 2013, 2015; Rickabaugh, 2012):

- 1 *Agency* is about the way people communicate and negotiate with each other when learning. *Agency* concerns the engagement of the student in terms of awareness of 'personal power' and the motivation to learn. *Agency* covers the aspects of awareness and personal meaning of personalised learning within the given context.
- 2 *Affordance* means affording or allowing learning processes of individuals by an organisation and/or school, as well as facilitating these processes. *Affordance* is focused on creating a stimulating learning environment, organising the partnership in learning, facilitating the individual learner by offering assistance and advice in the learning process, creating an innovative approach to learning within the organisation, and financing personalised learning. Through *affordance*, organisations can both recognise the importance of learning to their organisation, and facilitate the learning of 'their people'.
- 3 *Assessment*, in the context of personalised learning, deals with different forms of assessment which all focus on the personal assessment of a person's learning experiences, whether acquired informally, formally, or non-formally. In all forms of assessment, the personal norm of valuation is always leading, while the social norms of valuation from qualification systems and job systems may possibly be used as frames of reference. Such an *assessment* firstly includes all types of self-assessment, such as self-examination and self-valuation.
The next priority is linking what has been learned personally to the normative framework of an organisation or qualification, or a personally set objective. Assessment then acquires the significance of assessment *of, for or as* learning: there is either a direct effect (cashing in on the outcome of the assessment) or a prospective effect, or continuity of learning through development and further development of a person in terms of set learning objectives.
- 4 *Ownership* refers to the autonomy of the individual learner and his/her personal sense of owning his/her own learning process. This includes both the preparation and implementation of this learning process, as well as achieving milestones in this process: these might be summative (qualifications, partial qualifications, formal validation of informal work, etc.), formative (shaping learning and career opportunities, etc.) or reflective (empowerment, shaping identity and becoming aware of personal values).
- 5 *Co-design* is the theme that defines the true nature of personalised learning. Without an element of *co-design*, an individual can neither be a 'partner in learning', nor can there be any personalised learning. This is because unless the individual can participate in shaping and implementing the learning process, learning cannot be partially tailored to the input and learning needs of the individual learner concerned. In this sense, *co-design* is the activating agent in personalised learning. Moreover, where *ownership* principally focuses on creating a sense of ownership of personal values and learning experiences, *co-design* creates a 'learning action plan' from these values and learning experiences, allowing the overall design to be made in close consultation with the other partners involved in the selected learning process.

Linking VPL with personalised learning

In a qualitative study with a multiple case design, the impact of VPL on personalising learning was examined in Dutch practice (Duvekot, 2016). This study yielded detailed information on the linkage between the two phenomena of VPL and personalised learning. In summary, the analysis showed:

- in every imaginable situation and context, VPL resulted in a particular perspective for a lifelong learning-strategy for the actors involved, i.e. the learning individual in his/her dialogue on the design and implementation of learning strategies with employer(s) and/or teacher(s)³.

3 Employers and teachers are a metaphor for representing the actors on the labour market and in the learning system when it comes to activating learning opportunities. In this study (Duvekot, 2016) the emphasis is on the dialogue of these two actors with learning individual, being the third actor in the lifelong learning arena.

- In all case studies, under-utilisation of individual potential occurred due to the failure of either the learning system or the HRD-system to fully implement the VPL-process, or allowed it to be personalised.
- The various cases showed that individual learners who took time to reflect on their own learning experiences strengthened their position in the dialogue about the design of their learning process. These dialogues, in accordance with Paulo Freire's humanising vision, operated as a 'gap-closer' between the learners and teachers/trainers; in this way the learners managed to build a bridge to a personalised follow-up programme in one or more areas of learning.
- The characteristics of policy development not only showed the slowness of implementation of policies in practice, but also that open dialogue in particular is conducive to the activation of the individual learner.
- Competences filled and coloured the dialogues on learning strategies.
- The portfolio was the carrier of the entire VPL process, especially if the process of linking learning objectives, learning requirements and learning opportunities was based on the validation of personal learning outcomes, and used as the starting point for organising a learning cycle based on the *portfolio-loop*.
- The various dialogues between the actors in the learning triangle were essential for both VPL and personalised learning. This is particularly true in case of an open dialogue, based on a reflective as well as a summative/formative approach of VPL.
- Assessment helped to connect the actors in the learning triangle. This effect occurred in all the three forms of assessment that were analysed in this study: *of, for* and *as* learning, particularly in the formative mode and the reflective preconditional mode of VPL.

This analysis shows that the VPL process comes into its own and enables personalised learning if there is an open dialogue on learning strategies and individual ownership of learning is permitted. In all case studies, in various degrees, VPL had its impact on the design and implementation of lifelong learning and, moreover, a genuine impact on personalising the learning taking place after the VPL process. After all, individual ownership of learning was enhanced by VPL through (1) raising the awareness of the value of prior personal learning experiences and (2) grounding further (lifelong) learning on personal design and meaning.

Least of all, this analysis gives credits to Paulo Freire's statement in the 1970s that learning needs to be addressed as a developmental and dialogical process of 'action-reflection-praxis' of and by people (i.e. teachers and learners). It should be an anti-depository process, contrasting the traditional 'banking-system' (Freire, 1970). With 'banking' he meant a process in which knowledge is directly transferred to students with the teacher as the sole distributor of knowledge and the student as the passive receiver of this knowledge. Instead of 'banking' the ground floor for learning can better be 'portfolio-ing', in which learning is based on prior learning experiences of the individual and the self-management of recurring future learning. Moreover, the role of the teacher can also be filled in by a manager or team leader on the work floor. In this way VPL adds value by making the learning process the object of learning, with the learner and teacher (or manager) as partners in learning, openly debating the design and implementation of the learning needed or desired.

To conclude

The main question for this contribution was how to utilize the systematics of Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) as an effective instrument for the sake of personalizing learning in 'the learning society'? For answering this question, I aimed at showing the potential of VPL as a matchmaker between the main actors and the critical success factors for developing and implementing VPL. In all contexts the VPL-process follows more or less the same phases and steps. This can help in demonstrating how and where to set up interventions for the sake of creating time- and money-effective and efficient lifelong learning-strategies with a variety of learning objectives and on a win-win-win-basis for the learner, organisations on the labour market and learning providers, let alone the benefits that they together will generate for society as a whole.

More visibility and insight into the use of VPL for personalised learning can enhance and widen the dialogue(s) on activating learning because it is in any case clear that VPL offers challenges and opportunities for all actors involved. The linkage between VPL and personalised learning is principally based on experiences in practice. After all, as Paulo Freire wrote (1970): '*Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.*' It is this knowledge on which the acceptance and practical application of VPL for personalised learning rests. It is the human being who learns, not the organisation, 'school', or system, driven by the concept of building further learning on prior learning. That is exactly what VPL is meant for, and why personalised learning suits VPL.

In order to reach out to actually creating such learning situations in society, further research into the approach, methodology and effects of VPL and personalised learning is necessary in order to be able to use both phenomena in the context of lifelong learning strategies. Next to these more methodological and instrumental investigation, research is also needed into the 'ins and outs' of VPL and personalized learning in 'their' practice with respect to the actual process steps, the ways of working, the impact, the role of policy and advocacy, the need for funding, etc.

Last but not least, research on the practice of VPL and personalised learning shouldn't only take into account which material impact is generated but also the tangible or immaterial impact. After all, learning isn't a matter of social or economic rationale alone but is even more importantly steered by a learning cultural that is tuned in to the enjoyability of learning!

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Appendix 1. Terminology

Competence	An ability that extends beyond the possession of knowledge and skills. It includes: 1) cognitive competence; 2) functional competence; 3) personal competence; and 4) ethical competence.
CBI	Criterion Based Interviewing (CBI) is a style of interviewing often used to evaluate a candidate's competence, particularly when it is hard to select on the basis of technical merit: for example, for a particular graduate scheme or graduate job where relevant experience is less important or not required.
CPP	Critical Professional Practices (CPP) are practices in which the professional faces a professional problem of dilemma. Such practices occur on all professional levels and can result in 'professional products' that can prove acquired competence(s).
Formal learning	Learning which occurs in an organised and structured context (in a school/training centre or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically leads to qualification or certification
Informal learning	Learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organised or structured (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner's perspective. It typically does not lead to certification.
Knowledge society	A society that creates, shares and uses knowledge for the prosperity and well-being of its citizens.
Learning outcome	Statement of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process, which is defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence.
Learning society	A society in which learning is considered important or valuable, where people are encouraged to continue to learn throughout their lives, and where the opportunity to participate in education and training is available to all.
Level descriptors	A level descriptor is a statement that provides an indication of appropriate depth and extent of learning at a specific stage in the programme of study.
Lifelong learning	Lifelong learning embraces all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills/competences and/or qualifications for personal, social and/or professional reasons.
Non-formal learning	Learning that is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support), but which contain an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It normally does not lead to certification.
Personalizing Learning	Personalizing Learning occurs when the learner understands how he/she learns best so he/she is active in designing his/her learning goals. This learner has a voice in how he/she likes to access and acquire information, and a choice in how he/she expresses what he/she knows and how he/she prefers to engage with the content. When a learner owns and takes responsibility of his/her learning, he/she is more motivated and engaged in the learning process
Validation of learning	The process of assessing and recognising learning outcomes, including from non-formal and informal learning. Validation usually refers to the process of recognising a wider range of skills and competences than is normally the case within formal certification.

Appendix 2. On competences

Competences focus more than any other descriptor on the ability to apply learning outcomes adequately in a defined context (education, work, personal or professional development). This application is of concern to the individual learner as well as to the qualification body (e.g. a school, institute or university). There is however an enormous number of definitions of competence or competences; it seems every organisation, school and university seem to prefer designing their own definitions. The main themes all these definitions cover are more or less general: descriptions of work tasks or job outputs and descriptions of behaviour.

A competence can best be understood as *“a cluster of related knowledge, skills, and attitudes that affect a major part of one’s job (a role or responsibility), that correlates with performance on the job, that can be measured against well accepted standards, and that can be improved via training and development”* (Parry, S.B., “The Quest for Competences”, Training 33/1996, 48-56).

A competence manifests itself on the level of the individual in showing successful behaviour in a certain, context related situation. A competence is variable in time and is to a certain extent capable of being developed. A competence consists of an integrated complex of knowledge, skills, insights and attitudes, where personal characteristics and aspects of professional functioning also exert an influence on (the development of) competences in a certain way.

This definition entails that competences are focused on the individual and his/her ability to solve (professional) problems. Professional problems are solved by producing professional products. It is in these professional products that the level and existence of competences becomes visible. Professional products are products or services provided by a professional to a customer that meet predetermined quality standards with respect to the product or process and that directly or indirectly add value. It is in an outcome-based assessment-approach where the opportunity arises to link the results of professionals to learning programmes. Requirement for the learning programme is that the content of the programme is formulated in terms of competences.

Competences come in many forms and clusters. One way of understanding competences is by dividing them into generic and specific competences:

- *Generic competences* are high-level transferable competences such as the ability to work with others in a team, communicate, influence and have interpersonal sensitivity. They can also be called ‘behavioural or meta-competences’ because they always play, regardless of the context, a role in someone’s actions. Generic competences can be strengthened and developed by means of learning programmes.
- *Specific competences* are the ‘functional or dedicated competences’ that are demanded and used in the context and activities of an individual. These competences describe the application of competences in specific situations, such as application of marketing-skills for a specific firm or technical designs. Specific competences can also be strengthened and developed by means of learning programmes.

When considering the general definition of a competence - *“an ability that extends beyond the possession of knowledge and skills. It includes: 1) cognitive competence; 2) functional competence; 3) personal competence; and 4) ethical competence”* - it might also be useful to define these 4 elements as meta-competences:

1. Cognitive competence is defined as the possession of appropriate work-related knowledge and the ability to put this to effective use.
2. Functional competence is defined as the ability to perform a range of work based tasks effectively to produce required outcomes.
3. Personal or behavioural competence is defined as the ability to adopt appropriate, observable behaviours in work related situations.
4. Ethical competence is defined as the possession of appropriate personal and professional values and the ability to make sound judgments based upon these in work related situations.

source: Cheetham, G. & Chivers, G. (2005) *Professions, Competence and Informal Learning*. Cheltenham, Edward Elgar.

Appendix 3: Portfolio-format © CH-Q/CL3S 2014

1. Personal data

Full name	
Date of birth	
Gender	
Place (and country) of birth	
Nationality	
Address	
Country	
Phone number	
Email address	
Driving licence	
[add rows if necessary]	

2. Overview of personal key competences, skills and qualities

1.	
2.	
3.	
...	[add rows]

You might use the schemes below to classify your competences in the table above. You might also use your own competence classification scheme to arrange your key competences:

- *Subject-based competences*: are related to your knowledge and skills of a specific subject or work domain.
- *Methodical competences (work approach)*: competences that express something on how you are doing things, like I am able to organize well, I can plan well, I am a problem solver, etc.
- *Self-competences (brainpower, personally related effectiveness)*: competences that express something about yourself, like I am disciplined, I am flexible, etc.
- *Social competences (interpersonal effectiveness, management)*: competences that emerge in social situations, like I am good in cooperating with others, I am empathic, etc.

3. Formal learning: school, university, vocational training, etc.

Write down your formal learning in chronological order. In the table below, fill in the schooling you have had from primary school onwards. Write down all your schooling, even studies you did not finish or do not regard as important. You can also mention here training courses, refresher training and other courses.

Period	Training/schooling:	Description of learning activities	Description of evidence and number of evidence in the portfolio	Summary of the most important skills/competences
year, month	type, level, institution	Subjects, diploma, etc.		I know..., I can..., I am capable of..., I have...
...	[Add rows]			

4. Work experience

Write down your experiences with permanent and/or part-time appointments, temporary work, work placements, holiday jobs and jobs on the side, freelance work, etc. Write down in chronological order.

Period	Description of the company, institute, unit, etc.	Description of the Activities	Description of evidence and number of evidence in portfolio	Summary of the most important skills/competences
year, month		Job / role (be concrete!)		I know..., I can..., I am capable of..., I have...
...	[Add rows]			

5. Informal experiences

Write down your activities in spare time, hobbies, voluntary work, club life, in private life, in tasks/activities in the family (unpaid activities). Write down things done in tasks/activities and the private area in chronological order. Briefly describe the successive individual activities.

Period year, month	Description of the context in which the activities are taking (or took) place	Description of the Activities Job / role (be concrete!)	Description of evidence and number of evidence in portfolio	Summary of the most important skills/competences I know..., I can..., I am capable of..., I have...
...	[Add rows]			

6. Transformations

Describe below which important transformations you experienced in the area of formal learning, work experiences or informal experiences.

7. Reflection

Describe how you reflect on the various parts of this portfolio. For inspiration you can use these questions:

- Do you have a specific theme or a significant category of key competences/skills/qualities?
- What are your career plans? How are you going to use your key competences to fulfil your plans?
- In what other way are you going to use your key qualities?
- What qualities would you like to develop further? Why these? What are you going to do to develop those qualities?
- What are you going to use your portfolio for?
- What image will people have of you, if they read your portfolio?
- Is your portfolio complete? Why (yes/not)?
- What insights did you get from building your portfolio? In what way could you incorporate these insights in your life or work?

8. Overview of evidence / documentation

- Include all evidence gathered (so far) in the list.
- Update your list of evidence / documents regularly!

	Type of document	Date of submission	Organisation / company
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
...	[add rows]		