

Case study: Val-Form qualification procedure for metalworkers

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Introduction

The case study presented here was compiled on the basis of three interviews and other available sources¹. The case study is not intended to give an example of a qualification procedure. Instead, the aim is to demonstrate the strengths and potential weaknesses of qualification procedures in the area of vocational education and training (i.e. upper-secondary level). The case study is based on three interviews, each representing three different perspectives. With this approach, the case study is able to shed light on both the differences and similarities between these three perspectives. The case study ultimately shows that all three actors viewed the Val-Form qualification procedure for metalworking in a positive light.

Section 1 of this case study focuses on Val-Form qualification procedures in general. This section therefore does not deal specifically with the Val-Form qualification procedure for metalworkers. The section provides background information about all Val-Form qualification procedures as well as general information about the various stages in a Val-Form qualification procedure, which apply regardless of the occupation considered.

Section 2 focuses on the Val-Form qualification procedure for metalworkers. This section does not discuss the exact skills and competencies assessed in the Val-Form qualification procedure for metalworkers. Instead, the section presents the perceptions of the three actors involved in the Val-Form qualification procedure for metalworkers. The section then takes a bird's eye view of the qualification procedure to highlight requirements in terms of people involved and their respective roles and functions.

In order to preserve anonymity, the three interviewees will be referred to according to their function or role within the qualification procedure.²

1 Background information

Val-Form qualification procedures combine the concept of recognising informal education and training with the concept of providing complementary training to fill observed gaps in education and training. Established by the Canton of Valais, Val-Form qualification procedures are intended for adults who have gained work experience but lack formal qualifications. Upon completion of a Val-Form qualification procedure, candidates are awarded a Federal VET Diploma.³

The Canton of Valais Office for Occupational, Educational and Career Guidance (OSP) established a Val-Form Unit, which works on an inter-institutional basis.

¹ Some of these sources are unpublished documents used internally by OSP's Val-Form Unit.

² We would like to express our sincere gratitude to these three people for having taken part in this case study. Their involvement made this three-fold vision possible.

³ The Federal VET Diploma is an upper-secondary level qualification awarded upon completion of a three- or four-year VET programme. VET programmes usually start shortly after completion of compulsory education (at the age of 15 or 16). Swiss vocational schools offer one of two types of VET programmes: full-time VET programmes, which are entirely school-based; and dual VET programmes, which combine school-based and work-based learning. With dual VET programmes, students spend part of the week studying at a vocational school and the rest of the week doing a paid apprenticeship at a host company. Approximately two-thirds of all young people coming out of compulsory education in Switzerland enrol in an upper-secondary level VET programme.

1.1 Origins of Val-Form qualification procedures

Since 1995, the Canton of Valais has run an institutional recognition programme⁴, which is specifically intended to get the unemployed back to into the labour market.

In 2003, the Canton of Valais Department of Education, Culture and Sports (DECS) launched a pilot project to test the “Val-Form qualification procedure” concept. The pilot project was supervised by the Cantonal Office for Vocational Education and Training Office (SFOP) and was jointly run by the Canton of Valais Office for Occupational, Educational and Career Guidance (OSP) and the Sion Vocational Education and Training Centre (CFPS).

Since then, Val-Form qualification procedures have been established for many occupations:

- Social care
- Community healthcare
- Social work
- Metalworking
- Commerce
- Logistics management
- Information technology
- Industrial cleaning
- Retail
- Restaurant work
- Media

Since 2005, Val-Form representatives have been involved in work led by the Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology (OPET) regarding its national “*Validation des acquis*” project⁵. OSP’s Val-Form Unit helped develop OPET’s National Guide on the Recognition of Informal Education and Training in 2008. Specifically, OSP’s Val-Form Unit was able to contribute its experience gained from other successfully completed qualification procedures for the recognition of informal education and training in the Canton of Valais.

1.2 Legal framework

The following legal frameworks made it possible to introduce Val-Form qualification procedures:

At federal level:

Vocational and Professional Education and Training Act (VPETA, SR 412.10) of 2002, which came into force on 1 January 2004, the most important articles of which are: Art. 9, para. 2, Art. 17, para. 5 and para. 33

Vocational and Professional Education and Training Ordinance (VPETO, SR 412.101) of 2003, which came into force on 1 January 2004, the most important articles of which are: Art. 4, Art. 30, para. 2 and Art. 31 para. 1 and para. 32

⁴ See the explanations of terminology provided in chapter 2 of the 2008 Annual Report for Switzerland

⁵ OPET launched the national “Validation des acquis” (“recognition of informal education and training”, <http://www.validacquis.ch>) project in 2005. The Validation des acquis project aims to establish common bases for the recognition of informal education and training across the 26 Swiss cantons. The project will be completed at the end of 2009.

At the cantonal level:

Regulation of 20 February 2008 on institutional recognition and recognition of informal education and training

The Article introducing Val-Form qualification procedures (which combine recognition of informal education and training with recognition of complementary training) replaces the former Article 41⁶, which enabled adults to take exams at the end of an apprenticeship without having to go down formal training routes. All they had to do was provide supporting documents showing that they had gained work experience equivalent to one and a half times the duration of the corresponding VET programme.

1.3 Val-Form: specific features and position in the Swiss legal framework

Val-Form qualification procedures are largely based on the standard qualification procedure developed by OPET's national platform for the recognition of informal education and training. This standard qualification procedure is presented in OPET's National Guide on the Recognition of Informal Education and Training (Office fédéral de la formation professionnelle et de la technologie, pp. 20-25, 2008).⁷ Val-Form qualification procedures were formally accredited by OPET in 2007⁸.

Val-Form qualification procedure:

1. **Information session** (phase 1 of the standard qualification procedure described in the OPET National Guide). The information session seeks to draw a distinction between general skills (relating to a number of occupations) and specific skills (relating to a single occupation). Upon completion of the information session, candidates are asked to temporarily register for the qualification procedure (Appendix 1: Val-Form information session advertisement, *le Nouvelliste* 29 May 2008)⁹
2. **Initial interview** (phase 1 of the standard qualification procedure described in the OPET National Guide). Led by a skills adviser, the initial interview seeks to determine whether the candidate possesses the skills and experience required to obtain a Federal VET Diploma for the given occupation. Upon completion of the initial interview, the candidate will be able to confirm his/her registration.
3. **Self-assessment** (phase 2 of the standard qualification procedure described in the OPET National Guide). The self-assessment form is completed under the guidance of a skills adviser. It consists of 5 half-days of group workshops (linked to one occupation), 4-5 hours of individual interviews and approximately 120 hours of working from home in order to establish an assessment portfolio. The result is a retrospective presentation of the candidate's work experience or lack of professional experience in relation to the desired qualification. (see Appendix 4: Structure of assessment portfolio)

⁶ Former VET Act of 1978

⁷ 1. Information and advice
2. Self-assessment form
3. Diagnostic assessment
4a Summative assessment (in the case of partial recognition during phase 3)
4b Issuance of qualification

⁸ The cantons require federal accreditation in order to issue a Federal VET Diploma. Within the scope of the national project, there will be few cantonal qualification procedures until the end of 2011. This has been done to leave room for policy amendments based on the OPET National Guide.

⁹ The *Nouvelliste* is a local daily newspaper in the Canton of Valais.

4. **Diagnostic assessment** (Phase 3 of the standard qualification procedure described in the OPET National Guide). Two experts carry out the diagnostic assessment. These experts review the candidate's assessment portfolio and interview the candidate to verify the information provided. The interview is semi-structured in that it is based on the assessment portfolio. The experts may also request additional verification of one or more matters (e.g. visit to the candidate's workplace) but this does not form an official part of the qualification procedure. Upon completion of the diagnostic assessment, the experts will draft a detailed assessment report indicating what is recognised and what is not. The experts send the assessment report to the assessment committee and to the chief expert. Candidates will then receive a letter informing them of the experts' decision. This decision is drawn up in the form of a certificate signed by the chief expert.
5. **Complementary training.** Candidates may be required to undergo complementary training to fill observed gaps in education and training for the given occupation. Candidates must pay the cost of complementary training. Complementary training is organised in various ways, depending on the number of participants and shared needs: tailor-made training courses to address the specific needs of candidates, apprenticeships or self-study under the guidance of one or both experts.
6. **Summative assessment.** (Phase 4a of the standard qualification procedure described in the OPET National Guide). The summative assessment examines the skills that were lacking at the time of the diagnostic assessment. Upon completion of the summative assessment, candidates will be informed of the final decision regarding their qualification.
7. **Issuance of qualification.** (Phase 4b of the standard qualification procedure described in the OPET National Guide). The qualification (Federal VET Diplomas are currently only available for a few occupations) is issued by the canton.

It is worth mentioning that "general education" subjects¹⁰ (which form an inherent part of VET programmes but are not specific to the occupation) must be recognised prior to issuance of the Federal VET Diploma. Thus far, general education subjects have been assessed separately from vocational subjects and have been subject to a specific procedure. At present, work is underway to enable simultaneous assessment of both general education and vocational subjects. Candidates who have already obtained a Federal VET Diploma prior to this or who are able to provide supporting documents showing that they have completed equivalent training in this area are exempt from the requirement of obtaining a general education qualification.

¹⁰ "Implementation of skills with the aim of achieving benchmarks in areas relating to personal life, society and the development of private, professional and social projects." (Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology, 2006, p. 27)

1.4 Key players

One of the special features of Val-Form qualification procedures is close collaboration between key players in vocational education and training (educational and career guidance counsellors, VET professionals) and key players from the candidate's workplace and the world of work (regional employment offices, professional organisations¹¹ and companies).

All Val-Form qualification procedures have an assessment committee¹² comprised of:

- a) two representatives from professional organisations representing the occupation concerned: one to represent employers and one to represent employees;
- b) the chief expert for the occupation concerned, appointed by the Canton of Valais Department of Education, Culture and Sports of the Canton of Valais (DECS);
- c) a representative from the Canton of Valais Office for Occupational, Educational and Career Guidance (OSP) who chairs the committee;
- d) a vocational school representative specialised in the occupation concerned.

Tasks of the assessment committee¹³:

- a) To stipulate the assessment criteria;
- b) To issue a mandate to OSP-designated experts;
- c) To perform quality control checks to ensure that the qualification procedure runs smoothly;
- d) To interview, if necessary, candidates seeking recognition of informal education and training.

The assessment committee therefore plays a major role in each Val-Form qualification procedure. It brings together representatives of key players and acts as a decision-making body responsible for overall coordination of qualification procedures.

OSP-designated skills advisers have a good overall understanding of the entire qualification procedure and coordinate the various stages. The Val-Form Unit has two skills advisers who share responsibility for the following tasks:

- Coordinating the various partners involved in the various stages of the qualification procedure
- Taking responsibility for briefings and conducting initial interviews with candidates
- Training experts
- Helping the candidates to prepare their self-assessment forms

OSP-designated experts take over responsibility for the qualification procedure after the diagnostic assessment has been completed. It is the experts who are responsible for making referrals and who coordinate complementary training whenever gaps in education and training are observed.

¹¹ Professional organisations include trade associations and sometimes trade unions

¹² Article 11, paragraph 2 of the Regulation on institutional recognition and recognition of informal education and training of 20 February 2008

¹³ Article 12, paragraph 1 of the Regulation on institutional recognition and recognition of informal education and training of 20 February 2008

2. Val-Form qualification procedure for metalworkers

2.1 Description

Qualification procedure for metalworkers	
Start date	October 2006
Number of candidates who registered	13
Number of self-assessment forms completed	11
Number of candidates who dropped out	2 (mainly related to inability to speak French)
Competency modules used as a frame of reference	Revision of the main chapters of the standard methodology guide: 4 practical modules: P1: Implementation P2: Processing P3: Assembly P4: Construction and installation 4 theoretical modules: T1: Work-based calculations T2: Technical drawing T3: Technology T4: General education
Qualification to be issued	Federal VET Diploma in metalworking
Number of Federal VET Diplomas issued on 23 October 2008	8
Total number of Federal VET Diplomas likely to be awarded upon completion of the qualification procedure	10
Total cost per candidate	CHF 2,000 to CHF 3,500 (very low costs thanks to the involvement of the Canton of Valais Builder's Association)
Assessment committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 employer representative • 2 employee representatives (Unia trade union and Christian trade unions) • 2 vocational school representatives • 2 representatives from the career guidance office • 1 chief expert
Candidates	
Ratio of men to women	100% men
Average age	43
Previous education and training	Two candidates already have a Federal VET Diploma in another occupation, one candidate is an engineer (holding Polish qualifications)

Professional background	10 employees, 2 self-employed, 1 executive
Nationality	3 Swiss, 5 Portuguese, 2 Italians, 1 Pole and 1 Pakistani
Average years of work experience	19 years (ranging from 5 years to 34 years)
Costs paid by candidates	CHF 800 to CHF 2,000 (varies according to the number of complementary training courses taken)
Prerequisites	Minimum of 5 years of work experience, minimum age of 25, resident in Valais and fluency in French

2.2 Development

Launch of the qualification procedure

The qualification procedure was launched as a collaborative initiative between the OSP and the Canton of Valais Builder's Association (a local umbrella organisation representing various occupations in the construction sector).

There was a real desire to establish a qualification procedure for an occupation in the construction sector. The initiative was extremely well received by the Canton of Valais Builder's Association.

The decision to establish a qualification procedure for metalworkers was not intended to bring the unemployed back into the labour market. The idea was essentially to undertake pioneering work with a new occupation in an economic sector for which no Val-Form qualification procedures exist.

The assessment committee, which met 11 times in three years, handled overall coordination of the Val-Form qualification procedure. This assessment committee makes the key decisions, particularly as far as assessment criteria are concerned.

It is important to mention that the qualification procedure for metalworkers was launched prior to the national framework stipulated by OPET, which may explain certain differences between what is currently prescribed nationally and what the Val-Form qualification procedure for metalworkers entails.

Information

OSP's Val-Form Unit organised an information session in August 2006 for those interested in obtaining a Federal VET Diploma in metalworking through the qualification procedure to recognise informal education and training. In the following month, fifteen people registered. According to the skills adviser, this was more than OSP's Val-Form Unit had anticipated. The skills adviser interviewed all fifteen candidates separately and asked the candidates to complete a registration form.

It must be noted that the institutional partners (trade unions and employer's association) played a significant role in distributing information to companies.

A flyer specifically relating to the Val-Form qualification procedure for metalworkers was distributed to interested parties (Appendix 2: Flyer B27, Federal VET Diploma in Metalworking)

Self-assessment

Formally registered candidates then began a process of reviewing their own education and training background for the purpose of drafting a self-assessment form, which in turn would become the key component of the candidate's assessment portfolio. In order to do this, they completed 5 half-days of group work, during which they reviewed all 6 steps required to draft a self-assessment form (Appendix 3: Six steps required to draft a self-assessment form):

1. Reviewing work experience
2. Gathering supporting documents
3. Performing initial self-assessment on the basis of competency profile
4. Drafting skills sheets¹⁴ (descriptions of activities)
5. Organising supporting documents
6. Performing final self-assessment on the basis of competency profile

First of all, this approach allows candidates to draw up a list of their achievements, work experience (or lack thereof) and skills. After completing the first round of self-assessment on the basis of the competency profile (i.e. list of **eight** competency modules that must be recognised by the end of the qualification procedure in order to obtain the Federal VET Diploma), the candidates then begin filling out corresponding skills sheets for each of the **eight** competency modules listed in the competency profile. The first phase (steps 1 to 3) therefore serves the purpose of gathering information to be used in the second phase (steps 4 to 6).

The workshops focus in particular on filling out skills sheets. The candidates take turns drawing from their own experience and making proposals to the group. The aim of pooling ideas in this way is to enable candidates to fill in their skills sheets themselves, to describe their own work experience and to identify what they have gained from their work experience. All competency modules (i.e. the broad categories listed in the competency profile) must include one or more examples of experiences/situations that serve to demonstrate the essential skills required in the competency module. The workshops serve as methodological and conceptual benchmarks. Candidates learn to write about their experiences by conceptualising them, by paying attention to the technical terminology they use, by writing in the first person and by using action verbs.

The assessment portfolio fulfils three functions:

- Reveal information about the candidate: It brings forth what is already there and highlights it.
- Act as a self-positioning tool for candidates: through a process of self-assessment, candidates are able to compare their knowledge and skills with the knowledge and skills described in the various competency modules contained in the competency profile. Candidates are able to determine what education and training they already have and identify any gaps. This also enables the candidate to understand why some competency modules are recognised and others are not.
- Act as the main diagnostic assessment tool for experts: The assessment portfolio provides the starting point for assessment. The assessment process may then be completed by means of interviews and situation-based assessment, etc.

The workshops are rounded off with 4 to 5 hours of individual interviews with the skills adviser. In addition to this, candidates must spend 80 to 120 hours working on their assessment portfolios at home.

¹⁴ Tool used as part of the assessments in order to record, explain and self-assess one's skills against the reference framework

The assessment portfolio therefore takes the form of a folder composed of various documents (the candidate's self-assessment, supporting documents, skills sheets, etc...) (Appendix 4: Structure of assessment portfolio)

Diagnostic assessment

Two experts reviewed each candidate's assessment portfolio. It took the experts approximately 10 to 15 hours to review each assessment portfolio. Once they had reviewed the assessment portfolio, the experts called each candidate in for an interview. The chief expert was often present at these interviews. Some interviews were conducted by visiting the candidate's workplace and 4 candidates were also asked to demonstrate their skills by producing a workpiece within a specified amount of time.

Complementary training

Complementary training was organised in a relatively informal manner. Candidates who did not obtain recognition for a particular competency module were provided with full documentation by experts and were given time to undergo training themselves. The documentation provided was the same as that given to VET students doing their apprenticeship within the framework of their three- or four-year VET programme. Candidates informed the experts when they felt prepared to undergo the summative assessment and then took an oral examination lasting approximately two hours. Candidates were coached by their designated experts (the same experts who reviewed their assessment portfolios) and were able to ask these experts for explanations whenever they did not understand the content of a given competency module.

Issuance of the Federal VET Diploma

8 candidates obtained their Federal VET Diploma, which was issued by the cantonal authorities on 23 October 2008. (Appendix 5: Announcement of qualifications issued, *le Nouvelliste* 24 October 2008)

Sections 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5 present the perspectives of three interviewees who were involved in the Val-Form qualification procedure for metalworkers.

2.3 Metalworkers' procedure from the skills adviser's perspective

Skills advisers have a very good overview of the entire qualification procedure. They are responsible for coordinating the initial phases, welcoming candidates and helping them prepare their assessment portfolios. Skills advisers form the link between the experts who review the assessment portfolio and the candidates who prepare the assessment portfolio. Skills advisers also show the experts how to review assessment portfolios.

The skills adviser we met was full of praise for the candidates. He mentioned several times how impressed he was by their professional skills in the metalworking field. He pointed out, however, that language skills posed a problem. In fact, the two candidates who dropped out of the qualification procedure did so because they did not have an adequate mastery of French, not because they lacked professional skills. Candidates were penalised twice for their lack of mastery of French: 1) because they needed to pass all general education subjects in French, which form a large and significant part of the Val-Form qualification procedure; 2) because they had to write their self-assessment in French.

Skills advisers spend a great deal of time working with the experts who will be reviewing the candidates' assessment portfolios. It is in fact the skills advisers who show the experts how to review assessment portfolios. The experts who review assessment portfolios are the same people who act as examiners at the end of three- or four-year VET programmes (i.e. for the issuance of the Federal VET Diploma). In the case of recognition of informal education and training, experts are required to adopt a different methodology and consider different aspects when reviewing assessment portfolios than would be the case if they were asked to examine VET students at the end of their VET programme and apprenticeship. This means that experts need to rely more on intuition and inference when deciding whether to recognise informal education and training. And experts are not always willing to do this. The skills adviser must therefore convince them by putting forward arguments justifying recognition of informal education and training at face value. It is a delicate business. In many cases, both sides end up having to make compromises.

In fact, there are two opposing visions for metalworkers:

As far as the skills adviser is concerned, the assessment must be based on the supporting documents contained in the assessment portfolio. The nature of supporting documents may vary: photographs of specific achievements, various certificates or explanations of activities. The skills adviser works on the basis of the experience cited by the candidate in order to determine the skills acquired.

As far as experts are concerned, the assessment portfolio alone is insufficient. They need *at least* to interview the candidate after having read and analysed his/her assessment portfolio. In some cases, experts wanted to see the candidates in their professional environment. Four candidates were asked to demonstrate their skills by produce a workpiece made of metal under similar conditions (or even more demanding) that VET students face when taking their final examination at the end of their VET programme and apprenticeship.

It would therefore appear that the skills adviser finds himself caught in the middle between two different roles. In fact, skills advisers are not responsible for assessment. They are responsible for helping candidates to compile their assessment portfolios and are responsible for helping experts review these assessment portfolios. Skills advisers must therefore communicate extensively with the experts.

The review of assessment portfolios therefore becomes the object of negotiations between the skills adviser and the experts. These negotiations result in both parties making compromises of a more or less significant nature.

From the skills adviser's perspective, situation-based scenarios in which candidates are required to demonstrate their skills by performing specific tasks amount to the same thing as taking an examination. Such an examination should not be necessary if the assessment portfolio contains adequate supporting documents. He also fears that the interview conducted by the two experts with the candidate will become an interrogation.

One can say that a fundamental question remains to be addressed:

How are candidates able to prove their professional skills? Is the assessment portfolio alone sufficient? What additional checks can be made while maintaining the focus on supporting documents and not turning the process into an exam? Is it necessary to adapt the ways in which supporting documents are provided to experts concerned?

Nevertheless, the skills adviser states that for many assessment portfolios, experts provided a detailed assessment report that reached a very clear conclusion: we have "no doubt" as to the quality of Mr X's professional skills.

Strengths of the Val-Form qualification procedure from the skills adviser's perspective:

Despite diverging opinions as to how assessment portfolios should be reviewed and how diagnostic and summative assessments should be carried out, the skills adviser and the experts were able to reach agreements that both sides found suitable. The qualification procedure is deemed to have been a success.

All of the candidates completely deserve to be awarded the Federal VET Diploma in metalworking. They are outstanding professionals.

Weaknesses of the Val-Form qualification procedure from the skills adviser's perspective:

Some candidates had to wait a total of eight months between the moment when they submitted their assessment portfolio to the experts and the moment when they received the diagnostic assessment results from the experts. According to the skills adviser, this waiting period could have been reduced to two months. The delay was caused by the fact that the experts involved in the assessment had to deal with an excessive workload at construction sites.

The skills adviser regrets the fact that his role ends after the diagnostic assessment is complete. From that moment forward, responsibility for the candidates' progression through the qualification procedure is handed over to the Vocational Education and Training Centre of Sion (CFPS) and the experts who reviewed the candidates' assessment portfolio. These experts also provide guidance to candidates undergoing complementary training.

2.4 Metalworkers' procedure from the chief expert's perspective

The chief expert coordinates the team of experts responsible for reviewing the assessment portfolios. He acts as a kind of spokesman for them. He also reviews some of the assessment portfolios himself. The chief expert interviewed almost all of the candidates.

At the start of the qualification procedure, the chief expert had concerns regarding the qualification procedure. He was concerned that the experts would find it difficult to review the assessment portfolios in a fair and just manner. He was especially concerned that they would be unable to do so in a manner comparable to how VET students are assessed at the end of their VET programme and apprenticeship.

All experts received training in the basic principles of recognition of informal education and training. He believes that this introduction was essential both for him and for the experts. In fact, having to adapt the assessment approach lies right at the heart of an expert's job. They need to be *convinced* of the merits of the qualification procedure as much as by the content of the candidates' assessment portfolios.

Right from the outset, the chief expert wanted the qualification procedure to be simplified and wanted the financial burden placed on candidates to be kept to a minimum. He regrets the fact that so much importance was given to general education in the decision to grant recognition. He felt that it was unfortunate that a lack of mastery in French would prevent a candidate from obtaining the Federal VET Diploma. As it happens, general education posed an obstacle for two candidates in particular. Their lack of fluency in French made it impossible for their professional skills and experience to be recognised in the form of a Federal VET Diploma.

As far as costs are concerned, the chief expert went to great lengths to reduce costs of the qualification procedure, particularly the costs of complementary training. As complementary training predominantly involved self-study guided by the experts responsible for reviewing the various assessment portfolios, the cost to the candidate was zero.

The experts felt that the assessment portfolios were of excellent quality. The experts appreciated the enormous amount of preparation work that had gone into them. However, review of assessment portfolios alone is not sufficient to form a clear and definite opinion of the candidates' competencies. The experts therefore feel that an interview with the candidate is essential. In many cases, the experts also need to meet the candidates at their workplace and perhaps also see them produce something in front of them.

Four candidates were asked to demonstrate their skills by producing a workpiece. The candidates were given 8 hours to produce the workpiece in a workshop at the Sion Vocational Education and Training Centre (CFPS). In comparison, VET students taking the final examination to obtain the Federal VET Diploma are given 15 hours to complete the task. Materials and equipment were provided free of charge.

Three out of four candidates successfully completed this exercise and one candidate failed. The latter was given the opportunity to practise regularly at the CFPS workshop until he achieved the level required. This training (free of charge) corresponded to the complementary training that the candidate was required to undergo in order to gain recognition for Competency Module P4 ("Construction and installation").

The experts felt that their doubts regarding the professional skills of the three successful candidates were completely dispelled, which was critically important in their willingness to grant recognition for the corresponding competency module: "This workpiece shows the full range of a candidate's skills and provides absolute certainty," explained the chief expert. The candidate's ability to successfully assemble the workpiece enabled experts to verify a certain number of the skills required in order to pass Competency Module P4 ("Construction and installation").

The chief expert mentioned that he was initially a bit sceptical at the start of the qualification procedure. He has now become increasingly convinced of the value of the recognition of informal education and training. He even thinks that the Federal VET Diplomas issued upon completion of the Val-Form qualification procedure are worth more than the Federal VET Diplomas obtained via the traditional route. He needed to be completely reassured about the qualification procedure. It was his responsibility and he was afraid that the requirements would not match those required by the Federal VET Diploma. However, he now believes that the requirements were more stringent than those to obtain a Federal VET Diploma via the traditional route.

Strengths of the Val-Form qualification procedure from the chief expert's perspective:

Simple and cost-effective procedure.

All of the experts are convinced of the candidates' professional skills. They were not left with the impression that the Federal VET Diploma was being "handed to them on a silver platter".

It is a very enriching human experience for the experts; their relationship with experienced adults is very different from their usual work with young apprentices.

Weaknesses of the Val-Form qualification procedure from the chief expert's perspective:

Disagreements between certain members of the assessment committee and experts regarding assessment methods.

General education should not pose a barrier to the recognition of professional skills.

2.5 Metalworkers' procedure from the candidate's perspective

Profile

The candidate interviewed is 33 years old, married with two children. He completed a Federal VET Diploma in carpentry before working for one year as a carpentry labourer. He then a period of time unemployed, completed his military service and held a series of unskilled jobs. He was later employed by a company that manufactured false ceilings. When this company went bankrupt, he found himself once again unemployed. He took advantage of this period to complete a 6-month traineeship in metalworking where he learnt how to build aluminium verandas (aluminium windows and doors). His vocational qualification in carpentry was of great help to him when carrying out certain metalworking tasks, especially measurement taking and technical drawing. He then went to work for a metalworking company where he is still employed. He is currently a foreman at a construction site. He organises the work of other employees, takes measurements, provides quotations to customers and handles invoicing. He is also responsible for supervising and managing construction sites.

Involvement in the qualification procedure

He had initially thought of Article 41¹⁵, but when he went to the Canton of Valais Office for Occupational, Educational and Career Guidance in Sion (OSP), he was told that another qualification procedure was being introduced. The OSP advised him to wait until the new qualification procedure was fully in place. One day, by chance, he came across an advertisement in the *Nouvelliste* for a general information session on the recognition of informal education and training leading to the issuance of a Federal VET Diploma in metalworking.

His reasons for initiating the qualification procedure are mainly personal: He wanted to have his metalworking experience recognised by a Federal VET Diploma. This recognition is mainly to satisfy himself. Obtaining another Federal VET Diploma is also a motivating factor, even if he is not certain that the new qualification will have any impact on his working life.

He was under no pressure from his employer, friends or family. This decision was therefore a purely personal one.

He started the qualification procedure in 2006 and received his Federal VET Diploma in October 2008.

¹⁵ See 1.3 Legal framework

Assessment portfolio

The candidate found preparing the self-assessment form to be the most restrictive and tedious part of the qualification procedure. Searching for supporting documents, photographs, etc, as well as describing and explaining his work experience. The entire process required a huge amount of time and effort.

He was forced to juggle between his family and work obligations several nights a week and Saturday mornings in order to attend the workshops. Added to that was the time spent preparing the assessment portfolio at home. He estimates that it took him approximately one hundred hours. Fortunately, he was also able to prepare his assessment portfolio during a quiet period at work, which enabled him to work flexibly.

The candidate felt his skills adviser assisted and supported him extremely well. He said that the skills adviser was always on hand to listen to him and made himself readily available.

Explaining his professional activities proved to be a difficult task at times: it was the first time that he had had to write about his work experience. He found using technical terminology to be the greatest challenge: putting the activity into words was something new to him. This was exacerbated by the fact that the other candidates did not all speak the same language. Since the skills adviser was not specialised in this particular field, the candidate had to look elsewhere for information and guidance (instructions and other candidates) to express his work experience clearly.

The discussions between the candidates during the workshops were enriching. In fact, candidates took turns presenting an example of their practical experience, describing in detail how it related to the corresponding module in the competency profile. This often gave rise to debates on ways of doing things and on different practical experiences as well as on the technical terms used to describe these. There may have also been a little rivalry between the various candidates at times. However, this was largely viewed to be a positive thing. The candidate interviewed sometimes felt like a bit of an amateur compared to others in the group: in fact, he was one of the youngest and did not have as much experience as some of the others.

Diagnostic assessment

He received his diagnostic assessment results two months after his interview with the experts. He did not receive recognition for one of the eight competency modules and he had to demonstrate his skills to obtain recognition for a second competency module. The task he was asked to perform was similar to the situation-based, examination-like scenario described earlier. He was neither surprised nor disappointed by the results of the diagnostic assessment. He was able to discuss them and receive feedback from his skills adviser and from the chief expert. He was aware of gaps in knowledge for Competency Module T3 ("Technology") and he understood why the experts were unable to assess him on Competency Module P3 ("Assembly"): his most recent work experience had been focused on construction site supervisory work and coordination work rather than assembly as such. He performed well in the summative assessment to test his skills for Competency Module T3 ("Technology"), despite the fact that it was not easy for him to be examined in a workshop with which he was unfamiliar. According to him, it was the only way for him to prove his skills to the experts. In actual fact, his assessment portfolio was found to be lacking in this area due to insufficient practical experience. A visit to his workplace would also have failed to provide him with the opportunity to demonstrate these types of skills. Speaking about the workpiece that he had to assemble, he stated that he was able to "obtain the same result as a VET student would have but in a different way." This spontaneous remark is a perfect illustration of the process of recognising informal education and training. It also demonstrates his understanding of the various steps that the assembly task involved.

Looking back

The candidate interviewed has begun to see his work in a different light: he says “I now realise that I have done a lot of things and when these are put back to back, they represent a great deal of solid experience: there are things that I know how to do and things that I don’t know how to do. I am less afraid of doing certain things now that I have had the chance to actually do them and clearly understand the steps that I took to do them. The act of putting these down on paper gives you confidence when you look back over your work experience”.

Two things emerge from this statement:

- Taking stock of your achievements through self-assessment leads to greater awareness and increased confidence in one’s own abilities. The candidate mentioned several times that the self-assessment had given him greater self-confidence.
- As regards apprenticeships, it is interesting to note: “I learnt something: technical terms. Before, I used to perform tasks. Now I know exactly what I am doing and why. I know how to describe what I do using the right technical terminology.” By reinforcing his command of technical terminology and being able to use this terminology to explain his work, the candidate came out of the qualification procedure with a greater understanding of the metalworking occupation. The qualification procedure was therefore an educational experience for him.

The fact that he has another Federal VET Diploma is equally important. Besides the recognition given to his informal education and training, the additional qualification will be beneficial in the future. Admittedly, he is not quite sure how the Federal VET Diploma will change his professional life.

This candidate views his experience with the Val-Form qualification procedure to have been a very positive one. However, he has a few reservations concerning the large amount of time he had to wait between the moment he submitted his assessment portfolio and the moment when he received the diagnostic assessment results. He also mentioned the lack of updates, which meant that he had to find information himself to better understand the progression from one stage of the qualification procedure to the next. He also needed to gather information on his own about the various complementary training options available. The skills adviser confirmed the candidate’s statements. The skills adviser regrets the fact that his involvement in the qualification procedure stops after the diagnostic assessment results have been given.

In contrast, the candidate emphasised several times that all of the people involved in the qualification procedure were always willing to go the extra mile to help him whenever needed.

3. Conclusion and assessment of the qualification procedure

This qualification procedure is a good illustration of the way in which Swiss cantons operate. The Val-Form qualification procedure is an initiative that is largely supported by the Canton of Valais Builder's Association. From the very outset, the various actors put in a great deal of time and effort to make this innovative qualification procedure a reality.

Although Val-Form qualification procedures have been in place for some years now, a specific assessment committee¹⁶ has to be set up each time a new qualification procedure is introduced. This involves finding common ground between the various members of the assessment committee. At the same time, because there is no qualification procedure in place to recognise informal education and training in the new occupation, an entirely new qualification procedure needs to be set up.

Although discussions held by the assessment committee have not always been easy, problems and reservations were always laid out clearly on the table and were openly discussed.

OSP skills advisers are permanently involved in all Val-Form qualification procedures. Each time a Val-Form qualification procedure is introduced for a new occupation, the OSP skills advisers meet with the members of the assessment committee. At these meetings, two entirely different viewpoints are represented, which therefore gives rise to numerous debates, negotiations and agreements. Meeting participants must nevertheless find a solution, which more or less satisfies everyone involved. This is the only way to ensure that everyone recognises the validity and legitimacy of the qualification procedure to recognise informal education and training for the new occupation. Legitimacy is not a given; it must be tested and "experienced" first hand. The people involved in the qualification procedure must overcome prescriptive tendencies and/or pre-conceived notions of what is deemed to be the ideal.

¹⁶ Reminder: an assessment committee is comprised of two representatives from professional organisations responsible for the given occupation; the chief expert from the relevant sector, a representative from the guidance office from which the head of the committee is drawn and a representative from the training institute of the relevant sector

Differences in opinion regarding assessment show that it takes time for new approaches in the recognition of informal education and training to take hold. When four candidates were asked to demonstrate their skills by producing a workpiece, the skills adviser saw this as a rehash of examination procedures whereas the chief expert felt that this was the only way to eliminate doubt as to the candidates' mastery of the required skills.

This poses a fundamental question: Should the types of evidence (i.e. supporting documents, demonstration of skills, etc.) be the same for all occupations or should they be adapted to the relevant occupation or public?

The legitimacy of a Federal VET Diploma obtained through qualification procedures to recognise informal education and training is the subject of recurring debate at national level. Some fear that Federal VET Diplomas are being issued "too easily" and are being "devalued" as a result. As far as this particular qualification procedure is concerned, it is interesting to note that despite some significant disagreements between the skills adviser, the experts and the chief expert, they all reached the same conclusion: there is no doubt about the legitimacy of the Federal VET Diploma issued to these candidates. Although the methods employed to assess candidates are different from traditional methods used to assess VET students, the qualification procedure demonstrates the validity of assessment approaches based on negotiations and compromise.

The change in the chief expert's initial and final impressions is also worth mentioning. He started out a bit sceptical and suspicious in the early stages of the qualification procedure and by the end, he now defends the qualification procedure with conviction.

The candidate interviewed went through the qualification procedure mainly for personal reasons. He therefore did not take this step to return to the labour market, to gain new qualifications or to become more integrated into the community (which may be the case for some migrants). This candidate, who was perfectly well-integrated, both professionally and socially, therefore sought to have his work experience recognised by the Val-Form qualification procedure. It is interesting to note that this candidate states that the qualification procedure was an educational experience that enabled him to learn technical terminology and raise his self-confidence.

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