

European Inventory

on validation of informal and
non-formal learning



Education and Culture DG



Case Study: Investing in People, Italy

1.1 Introduction

Between the years 2000 and 2004, approximately 4000 people lost their jobs in the Italian province of Macerata when a number of private companies chose to relocate to countries such as Romania, Bulgaria and China, where the costs of production are thought to be lower. A large proportion of these job losses affected individuals that were already at considerable disadvantage in the labour market. They were often aged over 45 years and/or were disabled and most commonly had a low level of educational attainment.¹ Their prospects for re-employment were limited and the regional employment services were struggling to find them new positions².

During this time of rising unemployment, a Dutch organisation involved in a project funded by the ESF EQUAL³ programme advised the province of Macerata of their 'EVC model', which is their model for Validation of Informal and Non-formal Learning' (VINFL). Although this was not seen to be a complete solution to the problem of rising unemployment, it did seem to be an appropriate means of tackling some of the problems relating to skills because the process identifies skills achieved through *all* types of learning i.e. formal, non-formal and informal, which may be unconscious to the individual but relevant to the labour market. This information could then be used to find new positions for the unemployed.

In addition, it was thought that if the model was applied in companies routinely, it could also act to safeguard the jobs of employees. This is because it allows the management to become more aware of the potential of their human resources, especially those resources that they may have previously undervalued, which is often thought to be the over 45s and/or the disabled.

The 'Investing in People' project therefore emerged to apply the Dutch EVC model to three companies based in Macerata. It aimed to test how effective the process could be in helping to safeguard the jobs of the disabled and those aged over 45 years in these companies but with the aim of mainstreaming the project to benefit a wider target group and the local economy more generally. For example, it was thought that the regional

¹ It should be noted that the need to focus on the disabled in Macerata was already known through a first round Equal programme entitled *Diversita e sviluppo* (http://giornale.regione.marche.it/archivio/num0405/speciale1_en/artcom07.htm)

² www.equalmacerata.it

³ Equal is a European Social Fund (ESF) Community Initiative, providing funds to projects which test and promote new means of combating discrimination and inequalities in the labour market

employment services would also benefit from using the model, to help find jobs for the unemployed¹.

1.2 The 'EVC'/'VPL' Method

The Investing in People project consists of one key activity. Namely, to 'test' the Dutch validation methodology in the province of Macerata, piloting it primarily in three companies: *Fileni di Cingoli*² (a company working in the food industry), *Lube di Treia* (a company operating in the furniture industry) and *Falc di Civitanova Marches* (working in the shoe making industry). These companies were chosen because they fitted the 'Investing in People' criteria - they were thought to be 'solid' i.e. not at risk of closure, large (over 100 employees), well organised and receptive to the concept of validation. However, in the case of *Falc di Civitanova*, the company announced its relocation to China part-way through the project and although this was disappointing, it proved to be a 'case in point' for the project.

The 'testing' of the method involves a number of key actors³:

- The **Process Supervisor or 'Tutor'**: This is a company employee who is able to support the beneficiaries through the process. For example, in completing the portfolios and facilitating the relationship between the employee and the company management. The Tutor carries out this responsibility in addition to their normal role and with no extra expense to the company.
- The **Internal Assessor**: This is a company employee that has experience of the competencies that need to be assessed. He/she is normally 'Head of Department' and hence works closely with both employees and management. The IA receives a small amount of training on the validation process in order to carry out their role. However, it should be noted that this role is incorporated into their current position and is not a paid role in itself.
- The **External Assessor**: This is somebody who is thought to have sufficient experience to assess and evaluate competencies and plan future training within the relevant industry sectors. It is however a role that is difficult to fill in Italy because there are currently no External Assessors employed within the VET system. As such, the

¹ www.equalmacerata.it

² This company was particularly receptive to validation because they employ a very diverse workforce, many of whom are not Italian and it is in their interest to be able to understand different skills and experiences across national boundaries. They are also an organisation experienced in managing diversity and were hence very receptive to work focusing on disability and niche target groups such as the over 45s.

³ www.equalmacerata.it

project uses 'technical experts' (either working or recently retired) that have been recommended via word of mouth or through trade unions, technical schools, trade associations etc. Once appropriate External Assessors are identified, they receive a small amount of training in order to make them clear about the validation process. In terms of funding, they are paid for by the employer.¹

- The **employees**: They are considered to be 'active actors' and are involved in completing the portfolio, assessment, developing personal development plans etc. In this case *all* disabled employees and/or over 45 years were involved in the process, which simplified the selection process in this instance.

The method itself consists of a number of activities and processes, which include²:

- **Commitment building** i.e. making the company aware of the VPL procedures and processes, how the process will benefit them, the cost of the process etc. This process is undertaken by the Investing in People Project Managers.
- **Understanding the company** i.e. how it works internally, the HR system, company business plans etc. The 'Process Supervisor' and the company management undertake this process.
- **Creating standard professional profiles** i.e. defining the workers' activity within the company compared to a standard professional profile. The Investing in People Project Managers had to create these with the help of the Process Supervisor, using the ISFOL professional needs database and profiles from sector industry associations as a template. Currently, the ISFOL profiles are in draft form and are incomplete, hence there are no national or regional standard professional profiles in operation in Italy³.
- **Establishing competency indicators** i.e. defining the knowledge and ability that a person should have in order to carry out a particular job within that company. As with the standard professional profiles, these were written by Investing in People Project Managers with continuous collaboration with the company.
- **Identifying beneficiaries**, which in this case were over 45 years and/or disabled. *All* employees fitting these criteria were chosen since this target group was thought to be particularly vulnerable in the labour market.

¹ It should however be noted that although ordinarily the External Assessor would be expected to be paid for by the employer, that in this case the three companies involved in the piloting of the project were reimbursed by Investing in People.

² www.equalmacerata.it

³ An Italian Regional Experience: The VPL in the Province of Macerata (an Investing in People presentation)

- **Completing the portfolio.** Employees complete the portfolio with the help of their tutor (the Process Supervisor). They identify all of their training and work experience and include evidence of their competencies. This 'evidence' can take a number of forms. For example, a declaration from a previous employer, certification of prior vocational training, pictures of themselves working voluntarily e.g. on an ambulance, videos etc. Employees also complete a questionnaire on their behavioural competencies at this time. This is a self-evaluation questionnaire that assesses such characteristics as motivation, leadership skills, determination etc using a French software package called 'performance'. The findings are only shared with the employees' tutor and not the management.¹
 - ▶ The portfolio is entitled "*Individual Dossier Skills and Training Booklet*". It commences by informing the employee of the validation process and the purpose of validation. It then proceeds to document their formal educational qualifications (achieved both inside and outside of the workplace) and their non-formal/informal experience (achieved through the employees' work activities/experiences, any voluntary sector experience they may have and any knowledge or experiences they may have acquired through their hobbies/ life).
- **Assessment.** All of the stakeholders in the process i.e. the HR department or management, the beneficiaries, the tutor and the internal and external assessors then assess the portfolio, which the beneficiary has completed. Anything that cannot be validated or adequately evidenced in the portfolio is assessed in an interview or through examination.
- **Creating a personal development plan.** On the basis of the assessment stage, the HR department or management, the tutor, the internal and external assessors and the beneficiary all work together to produce a 'Personal Development Plan'. This plan defines a career strategy for the worker based on his/her competencies and the companies' own requirements.
 - ▶ The Personal Development Plan, which is also known as the 'Individual Development Plan' consists of an assessment table identifying whether the employee seems 'qualified', 'unqualified', 'partially qualified' or 'unsuitable' in each of his/her job areas. It proceeds to offer a summary of the employee and provides a list of the skills that are 'possessed', 'need improvement' or 'need to be developed'. Its conclusion is a 'training forecast' which has been collectively drawn up by the HR department or

¹ It should be noted that the project tutor also completes the questionnaire on behalf of the employee and the results are then compared. This exercise is thought to be valuable but it is again not shared with the company management.

management, the tutor, the internal and external assessors and the workers and which specifies the training that each employee needs¹.

- **Tailor-made vocational training for beneficiaries.** The personal development plan is used to provide the beneficiary with tailor-made training to allow the beneficiary to compensate for any gaps in their skills.
- **Second Assessment.** Once the training is complete, the worker is assessed again by the same people in the first round assessment to confirm that he/she has now acquired the necessary skills.
- **Validating/certification of competencies.** The project is trying to have the competencies assessed at a regional level in the hope that the portfolio and assessment form will be recognised by regional authorities, other companies and the VET system as 'credit'. It is doing this by raising awareness of the project. For example, through the mainstreaming group, which has a regional representative on board responsible for developing the new regional qualification system.

It is important to note that *all* of the above activities were carried out with considerable support from the Dutch partner, who was contacted regularly by the *Investing in People* project at all stages of the project, on at least a fortnightly basis. Their support was offered regularly via e-mail and telephone communication as well as through a number of project visits between Holland and Italy.

1.3 Applying the Method

Overall, it is felt that the EVC method is transferable and that the method would work to validate the learning outcomes of any employed or unemployed person, with experience of informal, non-formal and formal learning across any industry sector. It has currently been shown to work in the three pilot companies (*Falc*, *Fileni* and *Lube*) and the project is currently being 'rolled out' to ten other companies in Macerata, the local employment services and other projects in regions outside of Macerata. That said, a number of issues did arise, which should be noted if we are to learn more about applying models of validation in different contexts.

¹ Investing in People IT-G2-MAR-013 Individual Development Plan

1.3.1 Absence of a National Qualifications Framework

In Italy, there is currently no national or regional qualification framework in place to accredit formal, non-formal or informal learning collectively. This somewhat hinders the method since there is no national or regional recognition of non-formal and informal learning. However, work is in progress to establish a qualification framework compatible with the European Qualification Framework and hence there should be some 'top down' support for validation in the near future, which will aid some of the 'bottom up' initiatives that have evolved over recent years. The work of *Investing in People* has taken this into account and it is thought that all of the VET carried out through this project can, in the future, fit with a credit system based on learning outcomes. The lesson however is that models of validation will be easier to apply in countries where the development of a qualifications system based on learning outcomes and the acquisition of credit is already in operation.

1.3.2 Absence of specific Quality Assurance procedures

The collaborative work of the HR department or company management, the tutor, the internal and external assessors and the workers together ensure some degree of quality assurance, especially considering that there is also a set method/procedures in place (as detailed above). However, there are no specific quality assurance procedures in place thus far, although this is an *Investing in People* priority. For example, the project team is currently establishing a list of External Assessors, which will be used to quality assure part of the process.

1.3.3 Difficulties in Identifying External Assessors

In Italy, the VET system is relatively unstructured - there are few links between schools and businesses and there are no vocational training centres as such. As a result, it is difficult to find External Assessors and the project had to involve *any* actors with technical/professional experience that were seen to be sufficiently experienced to assess the workers. Often these people came from Trade Unions or industry/sector organisations. This did however prove to be difficult and should be taken into account as a barrier to applying the method in countries where the role of External Assessor is not already established.

1.3.4 Lack of widely recognised Occupational/Professional Profiles

Currently Italy does not have complete specifications for job roles within companies and therefore *Investing in People* needed to ascertain professional standards for each of the job roles being considered in their project. This naturally makes the application of the

model more time consuming than for countries where occupational standards are more developed.

1.3.5 Difficulties in Completing the Portfolio

Both the Dutch partner and *Investing in People* experienced problems with beneficiaries struggling to complete the portfolio. This is mainly due to the fact that a considerable amount of evidence is required to support the beneficiaries' claims and this can be difficult to source. As a result, there is considerable emphasis on the role of the 'personal tutor' to facilitate this process. Also, some active involvement was required by *Investing in People* staff initially. It should be noted that the issue is in the practicalities of completing the portfolio and not in misunderstanding the benefits of completing the portfolio, which employees tend to understand and be supportive of.

1.3.6 Adapting 'tools' to meet Different Needs

It can be necessary to adapt the VPL 'tools' e.g. the personal development plan and the portfolio to meet the different needs in certain countries, regions and organisations. For example, in Italy there is a greater tendency for its citizens to take part in voluntary services and hence the portfolio included more in this area. Care also has to be taken to ensure good translation of overseas documents.

1.4 **Outputs, Outcomes and Impact**

The *Investing in People* project was initially set up to validate the skills and experience of 30 employees across the three companies and, by December 2007, it will have achieved this. The majority of these employees were over 45 years of age, with 15/20% of beneficiaries being disabled. The over 45s had a low level of educational attainment i.e. they had finished school at the age of 14 years, whilst the disabled people could in fact have been well educated but disadvantaged due to their disability. All of the staff could be described as 'production line' or 'manual' staff.

It is thought that both the employees and employers have benefited from the project in a number of ways. The key benefit for the employer has been the introduction of a system of training and development in their organisation without the financial costs normally associated with this (all costs accrued through the validation process were reimbursed by the *Investing in People* project). Furthermore, they have also gained insight into the skills inherent within their organisation and an understanding of where the skill gaps lie, which has led to better-targeted training.

With respect to the employees, they have been empowered by the knowledge that they have learned certain skills through a number of different life situations, both in work and outside of work and they should be able to use this information to progress their career. Importantly, they have accessed further training with the company without having to repeat anything that they already know about. This bespoke training has been the key output of this project.

Currently, feedback questionnaires are being collected from beneficiaries and as such the extent of the benefits of the project will not be realised until January 2008. However, there is one case that is particularly well known to Investing in People:

“We realised after validating a disabled lady’s skills that she had the knowledge and experience to actually become an in-house trainer. She was competent in all aspects of her job and did not need any further training. We therefore realised that she could pass on her knowledge and experience in a new training role....Without the validation process, this would never have been known”

There are now thought to be another ten companies interested in having their employees’ skills and experiences validated and it is thought that the model will be applied to a further 100/150 people in the near future. This will not however be funded by Investing in People, it will have to be funded by the employers themselves. ‘Investing in People’ may however work with the companies to access other sources of funding that is available through industry bodies etc., although such funding is not guaranteed.

1.5 Sustainability and Mainstreaming

Mainstreaming *Investing in People* is a critical part of the project and is the key activity in operation now, as part of Action 3 of the EQUAL programme. Although the project focused on testing the Dutch model of validation in a very narrow context i.e. the over 45s and the disabled within three companies, it was always felt that the method could be applied to a number of contexts. Currently it is known that the method will be used in projects targeting immigrants as well as broader target groups in different industry sectors and in different Italian regions, including Abruzzi, Lazio, Liguria, Lombardia and Umbria.¹ Once other projects/organisations start to use the method, the extent to which it is transferable will be realised and more will be known about how it needs to be adapted in certain contexts.

¹ An Italian Regional Experience: The VPL in the Province of Macerata (an Investing in People presentation)

Currently, the Investing in People project is in the process of undertaking the following mainstreaming actions:

- Training for regional employment services, disabled services, over 45's associations, trade unions and employment associations. This will ensure that the relevant agencies are made aware of the benefits of validation of non-formal and informal learning. The employment services are already heavily involved and will prove instrumental in disseminating the project to a broader range of businesses.
- Training for HR Managers to raise awareness of validation and ensure more companies become aware of the benefits of validating non-formal and informal learning. These companies are actively contacted as well as being invited to participate if they visit the Investing in People website.¹ There are currently ten more interested companies.
- Working with the project partners to mainstream the project. These include Eurocentro Srl, the National Association for the Disabled (ANMIC), the “*Macerata Confindustria*”, Marchigiana Federation Union of Italian Cooperatives (UNCI) and the University of Macerata.²
- The En-Power project is an EQUAL-funded transnational cooperation project, which involves five projects from four different European countries (Italy, France, the Netherlands and Slovenia). This partnership is currently working on a booklet reporting on ‘tools to valorise human resources’. This will include the identification of best practice in validation of prior learning, which should support any mainstreaming initiatives³.

Currently the project in Italy resembles a ‘bottom-up’ approach and lacks top-down structures. It is hoped that the horizontal and vertical mainstreaming activities currently on-going will influence the regional and national agenda and help to make the project sustainable in the long term. This is yet to be realised and it is not known whether, without funding, employers will buy into the process in the future.

¹ www.equalmacerata.it

² www.equalmacerata.it

³ www.equalmacerata.it

1.6 Conclusion

The Investing in People project has had a number of successes. Following its work on testing the Dutch EVC model it can be concluded that the model itself is robust and flexible enough to be applied to a variety of contexts. For example, it can be used in different countries, with different target groups, in different industry sectors etc and is thought to be fully transferable. However, the impact of the project on a regional or national level is yet to be realised. The absence of top-down structures presents the project with a number of challenges and the long-term success of the current, on-going mainstreaming activities remains to be seen.