

The covenant: "A quality code for APL"

Identifying and accrediting a lifetime of learning

English version



The APL code:

- The goal of APL is to define, evaluate and accredit individual competencies.
- APL primarily answers to the need of the individual. Entitlements and arrangements are clearly defined and guaranteed.
- Procedures and instruments are reliable and based on solid standards.
- Assessors and supervisors are competent, impartial and independent.
- The quality of the APL procedure is guaranteed and is being improved on an ongoing basis.

Covenant for the voluntary quality code for the Accreditation of Prior Learning.

Introduction

The history of APL in the Netherlands starts in the nineties. At that time Dutch government and social partners came to the insight that employees could no longer count on life time employment with one employer. Career steps became normal and national stakeholders thought of defining life time employment no longer in terms of job security, but in terms of work security. In these discussions the idea of recognition of prior qualifications (EVK) was born. A few number of industries made a successful start with this instrument. In 2000, Dutch government, together with social partners, decided to stimulate the broader concept of accreditation of prior learning (APL).

Government stimulated APL but made no regulations. It was expected that the market itself would find out about the best way to develop, implement and use APL. This policy, called 'let a thousand flowers bloom', generated a lot of experience as well in educational institutes as in sectors of industry. Recently, larger organizations in the Netherlands have found out about APL. It appears that APL is earning its place in the areas of HRM and reintegration processes. APL gives support to increase the chances and broaden the options of both employers and employees (both job-holders and job-seekers) on the labour market. APL helps people to connect working and learning in new ways. The coming years, Dutch government invests more than 30 million Euros in APL and infrastructure for APL.

New questions arise at this stage. Although Dutch organisations built up a lot of experience, the majority of employees and unemployed could not get access to APL yet. Worse, most of them were never informed about the possibility. The structure of APL is settled in the Netherlands, but in practice the approach to APL is too diverse. The absence of regulations made the users of APL start to doubt about the differences in quality of all those APL procedures. "How can I really be sure that I can trust this provider of an APL procedure?" and "Will the results of this APL procedure be recognised everywhere?" are concrete questions posed by employees and employers, questions that have given us food for thought. They even prompted us to guarantee the quality of APL. Otherwise an excellent tool like this *could* become a victim of its own success, e.g., if buyers and providers were to place speed and a low price above quality. At the Work Summit, 2006, the Dutch cabinet and government, employers and trade unions therefore agreed as follows:

"The Cabinet will promote the APL Knowledge Centre's development of a quality framework for the APL procedure with broad support across all relevant parties and one resulting in a covenant between the government and the parties on the use of this framework."

This document is the covenant resulting from a broad consultation process among all stakeholders. The Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning were useful as basic information in the writing process. Main arrangements that the parties agreed upon are:

- The use of the code is voluntary, but the signing parties are dedicating themselves to promote the use of APL. Making its use mandatory would detract from the motivation to work with the APL code.
- Everyone who starts with an APL procedure agreed on the reasons for doing so. APL is not a standard process but an individualized series of arrangements customised on the goal and use of APL. Custom work is the standard.
- Every APL procedure ends with an APL report. This report states that the individual has documentation of the competencies he possesses. This makes APL something independent of the educational provider.
- Accredited APL providers are listed in a directory.
- The competencies of the people supervising these procedures and performing the assessments are documented. Only professionals can be supervisors or assessors.

- The quality of APL procedures is always being improved, both at the level of the providers of APL and at the level of the code itself. The more we can raise the profile of APL, the higher the quality standards we can set.

We think this APL Quality Code may inspire other countries. We are interested to know your opinion!

Erik Kaemingk
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The following parties undersign the covenant:

Stichting van de Arbeid, the Labour Foundation, is a national consultative body organised under private law. Its members are the three peak trade union federations and three peak employers' associations in the Netherlands,

Colo is the Association of Centres of Expertise on Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market. The core tasks of these centres are the innovation and maintenance of the qualification structure, the monitoring and promotion of the quality of learning in professional practice and joint responsibility for the quality of examinations,

PAEPON is the Platform of Accredited Private Educational Institutions in the Netherlands,

The Centre for Work and Income (CWI) signs in part on behalf of the SUWI partners UWV (National organisation for reintegration and temporally income unemployed people), VNG (Association of Netherlands Municipalities) and Divosa (Association of managers with municipal services in the fields of work, income and social welfare). These organisations are, in chain connected, responsible for the reintegration of short and long term job-seekers,

The Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (HBO-raad), on behalf of all 44 government-funded Universities of Applied Sciences,

The Netherlands Association of Vocational Education and Training Centres (MBO-raad), on behalf of all 42 government-funded vocational education and training centres and all vocational schools,

The Council for Agricultural Education Centres (AOC-raad), on behalf of all 11 government-funded agricultural education centres,

The Open University is the independent government-funded institute for distance learning at university level,

The State Secretary of Education, Culture and Science, signs partly on behalf of the State Secretary of Social Affairs and Employment.

Definitions

1. **APL: Accreditation of Prior Learning**
Accreditation: the act of bestowing civil effect on acquired competencies, based on an independent evaluation.
Prior: all learning and competencies that an individual has assimilated, regardless of form of learning.
Learning: the human developmental capacity to act in certain situations in an appropriate, effective and reasoned manner to achieve results.
2. **APL procedure:** all activities for the performance of APL in accordance with the APL code. APL procedures can be structured in a variety of ways and configured for the environment in which they are to be performed. Every APL procedure results in an APL report.
3. **APL report:** a document setting out the results of an APL procedure. The APL report describes the learning and competencies of the participant as compared against the operative standard.
4. **Accredited APL provider:** an organisation that offers APL procedures following the principles and premises of the APL code, and as such is entered in the directory of accredited APL providers.¹
5. **Evaluating organisation:** At present, KCE¹ and the VBIs² (organisations listed as such by NVAO³) are the organisations designated to evaluate whether an organisation is one working in accordance with the APL code. Social partners in sectors and/or industries, SUWI chain partners and professional organisations can

¹ KCE: *Kwaliteitscentrum Examinering* (Quality Assurance Centre for Examinations) evaluates the quality of the exams of all vocational education programmes of institutions (subsidised, private and exam institutions) with a licence against the national standards.

² VBIs: *Visiting and Evaluation Institutions* that evaluate the program at the behest of the institution in higher education. The NVAO reviews this external evaluation of the VBIs.

³ The NVAO (Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders) independently warrants the quality of higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders by means of evaluating programmes and issuing a quality mark, and contributes to improving this quality.

choose their own evaluating organisation for the evaluation of whether an organisation is working according to the APL code.⁴

6. *Civil effect*: relates to the opportunities on the national or European labour market opened to the participant after completing the APL procedure. Examples are admission to professional groups or training programmes.
7. *Quality code*: this covenant sets out the quality code for APL, in which the principles and premises of the quality of APL procedures are established. The full name we use is "Quality Code for APL," and in short we refer to this as the "APL code."

Whereas,

1. the use of APL is increasing steadily, and diversity in APL procedures is expanding. At present, everyone going through an APL procedure has an interest in being able to know the quality of the process before they start. The parties wish to establish arrangements on the quality of the APL procedures.
2. during the 2006 Work Summit on 1 December 2005, the Dutch cabinet and the social partners agreed that "the cabinet will promote the APL Knowledge Centre's development of a quality framework for the APL procedure with broad support across all relevant parties and one resulting in a covenant between the government and the parties on the use of this framework."
3. at the European level, the Netherlands has already formulated objectives for improving the educational level of people between the ages of 25 and 64; these objectives are known as the "Lisbon goals." These goals were drafted in 2000 with the objective of making Europe into a competitive knowledge economy within ten years. APL is one of the paths to the achievement of this goal.
4. the parties consider the creation of the APL code an important step. The parties want to promote, but not mandate, its use.
5. As from 1 January 2007, the government will be extending a tax facility to APL purchasers. In order to qualify for this tax scheme, the APL purchaser must be able to submit an invoice from an accredited APL provider.

⁴Whether this evaluating organisation must also have the approval of the government is still being discussed between the parties. The parties wish to reach agreement on this point by 14 November 2006.

APL Quality Code

Code	Details of implementation
<p>1. The goal of APL is to define, evaluate and accredit individual competencies.</p> <p>The accreditation of prior learning has a value in and of itself and contributes to employability. In many cases, APL can be a benefit to further career-related personal development.</p>	<p>1.1 A goal is explicitly linked to the APL procedure.</p>
	<p>1.2 The APL-supplying organization and each individual reach consensus on the use of the results of APL.</p>
<p>2. Individual entitlements: the APL process answers to the need of the individual. Entitlements and arrangements with the APL-offering organizations are clearly defined.</p>	<p>2.1 The accessibility of the APL procedure for participants is documented.</p>
	<p>2.2 Participation in the APL procedure is generally on a voluntary basis.</p>
	<p>2.3 The APL-offering organization and the participants make arrangements on the optimal course of the APL procedure.</p>
	<p>2.4 The participant decides whether he/she will participate in the APL procedure and will receive all relevant information needed to do so.</p>
	<p>2.5 Time frame for the entire procedure is realistic, feasible and known in advance.</p>
	<p>2.7 The privacy of the participant is guaranteed and the results of the APL procedure are the property of the participant unless agreed otherwise in advance.</p>
	<p>2.7 The participant is entitled to appeal, and there is a system in place for this option.</p>
<p>3. Procedure and instruments are reliable and based on solid standards</p> <p>Trust is the key issue. Trust has to do with civil effect, properly defined standards, and clear information on the way in which assessments are conducted and the arguments on the basis of which conclusions are drawn.</p>	<p>3.1 Tasks and capacities of all parties involved in all phases of the procedure are known and are functioning.</p>

Code	Details of implementation
	3.2 A standard coordinated to the relevant working area and which leads to the civil effect is used.
	3.3 The equivalence of the APL procedure with an initial vocational training programme must be demonstrated.
	3.4 The reliability and validity of the assessment instruments and procedures used is guaranteed, even if procured externally.
	3.5 The assessment instruments make use of any available evidence, no matter what the source.
	3.6 The participant is entitled to a concluding meeting to be informed of the result. This result, including the civil value of the result, is set out in an APL report.
<p>4. Assessors and supervisors are competent, independent and impartial</p> <p>Independence and impartiality are crucial factors in the evaluation and are rooted in the roles and responsibilities of the assessors involved in the process. It is of major importance to avoid unnecessary confusion of roles. Impartiality can be reinforced by training and the use of networks.</p>	4.1 The independence of the assessors is guaranteed.
	4.2 The roles of supervisors and assessors are separate.
	4.3 The supervisors have a proven track record of competence. They are able to present procedures and to interview, coach and give feedback to individuals; they are professionals in the fields in which their coaching specializes.
	4.4 The assessors have a proven track record of competence. They are able to interview, give feedback to individuals and evaluate competencies; they are able to communicate assessment results; they are professionals in the fields in which they conduct assessments.
	4.5 Supervisors and assessors keep their professional skills up.
<p>5. The quality of APL procedures is guaranteed and is being improved on an ongoing basis</p> <p>The quality of the APL procedure and the set of instruments used is guaranteed.</p>	5.1 The APL procedure is open.

Code	Details of implementation
Evaluations are conducted regularly. The results are incorporated into improvement actions.	
	5.2 Targets, procedure, assessment framework, assessment instruments, quality of assessors and supervisors, and APL administration are all evaluated regularly.
	5.3 Evaluation of the participants is a standing component of quality control.
	5.4 The organization lives up to the quality standard of APL.
	5.5 The evaluation and the APL procedure improvement policy that follows from the evaluation is embedded into the organization's existing quality control system.

The parties agree as follows:

1. the parties endorse the principles and premises concerning the quality of APL as set out in the APL code
2. this APL code is further developed into a review framework. On 1 January 2007, this framework will be adopted by the parties. The evaluating organisations can use this review framework to produce an assessment of the quality of the APL procedures.
3. This APL code is a contributing factor to three objectives linked to the introduction of APL:
 - a. Increasing the accessibility of APL. Clarifying what APL is and how APL must be offered.
 - b. Providing transparency. Allowing better comparison of different APL procedures.
 - c. Guaranteeing civil effect.
4. All organizations that offer APL and opt to profile themselves with the APL code must be accredited providers. An organization is accredited as an APL provider by means of a report by an evaluating organization. An "accredited APL provider" is entered in the directory of the accredited APL providers.
5. The accreditation of APL providers :
 - Organizations offering public programmes and/or examinations for MBO (senior secondary vocational education) for those programmes can have themselves provisionally registered as *accredited* APL providers without first being evaluated by an evaluating organization.
 - organizations offering public programmes and examinations for the HBO (higher professional education) can have themselves provisionally registered as *accredited* APL providers without first being evaluated by an evaluating organization.

Any organization wishing to become provisionally accredited must submit a signed statement to the APL Knowledge Centre declaring that it meets the requirements for an accredited APL provider.

- Other APL providers (e.g. private providers) can also have themselves registered as "accredited APL providers." To do this, they must submit the evaluation report of the evaluating organization to the APL Knowledge Centre.

On the basis of the report, the organization can be entered into the directory of accredited APL providers.

6. An APL procedure is a method of identifying the extent to which a person possesses certain competencies. These competencies may be rated in relation to a job standard, educational standard or professional standard. An APL procedure results in an APL report, which gives an overall comparison of the individual's competencies against the standard levels of those competencies. This APL report has an independent value to the individual, and can result in:
 - i. improvement or retention of the labour market position.
 - ii. exemption from the requirement to follow elements of a private training programme accredited by the sector, industry, SUWI chain partner or professional group.
 - iii. obtaining a private diploma, certification or partial certification accredited by the sector, industry, SUWI chain partner or professional group. In this case, a follow-up programme is not required.
 - iv. exemption from the requirement to follow elements of a public training programme accredited by the Minister of Education, Culture & Science/Agriculture, Nature & Food Quality.
 - v. obtaining a public diploma, certification or partial certification accredited by the Minister of Education, Culture & Science/Agriculture, Nature & Food Quality. In this case, a follow-up programme is not required.
7. APL can be the start of an individualized educational programme in pursuit of a diploma or certification. It cuts the programme fees borne by the employer and is a source of motivation to the employee or potential employee. APL may not be made a mandatory part of an educational programme, and it has an independent value to the individual.

8. The parties wish to promote the use of APL and the APL quality code amongst their members.
9. Until the end of 2007, the APL Knowledge Centre will coordinate the implementation of the quality code. The APL Knowledge Centre will perform, minimally, the following tasks in this implementation:
 - a. Set up, publish and administer the directory of accredited providers.
 - b. Publish the texts of the APL code and administer the corresponding standards.
 - c. Develop sample APL reports, portfolios and supporting tools. Investigate whether this will require making arrangements linked to the APL code.
 - d. Produce a model methodology to evaluate the quality of supervisors and assessors. Investigate whether this will require making arrangements linked to the APL code.
 - e. Investigate the effects and the impact of the APL code measured against the objectives linked to the introduction of APL (accessibility, transparency and civil effect).
 - f. Investigate whether the designation of evaluating organizations and the corresponding accreditation of APL providers under the responsibility of social partners in industries or sectors, or of the SUWI partners in the SUWI chain or in professional organizations, is actually happening. Investigate how the evaluating organizations proposed by the social partners are applying the APL code and the standards. Have an initial impartial and independent evaluation performed of the quality model and the use of the APL code.
 - g. Before 1 July 2007, the Knowledge Centre APL will write a letter with recommendations to the parties based on the above mentioned subjects. The discussion of this evaluation by the parties will include the determination of who will take on those tasks of the APL Knowledge Centre relating to the APL code in 2008 and thereafter.