Lifelong Learning in Recognition of Prior Learning Within Vocational Mining Training in Québec (Canada)

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Introduction

In 2002, the Québec government adopted the Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training (Gouvernement du Québec, 2002)[1], inspired by the Declaration of the Fifth UNESCO International Conference on Adult Education. With that policy, the government committed to "taking aggressive action toward the official recognition of adults' prior learning and competencies" (p. 25). The term chosen by the Québec government was *reconnaissance des acquis et des compétences*, which has been translated as "recognition of prior learning and competencies." However, here the Biennial term, Validation of Prior Learning (VPL), is used.

The development of the VPL system in Québec is at an intermediate stage. Government support for the implementation of VPL is confirmed by public policy and rules and frameworks are established, but implementation is uneven. Scarce research has been done and, as in other jurisdictions (CEDEFOP, European Commission & ICF, 2019), the statistics on the services are few and far between and incomplete (Bélisle & Fernandez, 2018; Bélisle et al., 2022).

This paper focuses more specifically on VPL in vocational training centers, i.e., training in the trades at the upper secondary level, designated here as VPL-VT. This training leads to the diploma of vocational studies (DVS), a level 3 diploma according to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012). This paper is based on research on VPL in the mining sector (Bélisle & Supeno, 2022) carried out in partnership with the Institut national des mines, an organization with the mission of supporting the education system and the mining industry in their various responsibilities pertaining to mining training. The objective of this paper is to present the VPL model in Québec vocational training and to highlight some of the challenges of continuing to implement it while keeping the focus on lifelong learning.

The VPL approach and process in vocational training

Vocational training in Québec comes under the national education system and includes more than 160 programs ranging from 600 to 1,800 hours, designed and implemented by the Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec in collaboration with stakeholders from educational institutions and the labor market. Official VPL at the secondary level is a right embedded in the law since 1988 (Education Act, 2021, art. 250) and is a free service for citizens or people with resident status living in Québec.

The 2002 government policy announced a harmonized approach to VPL in vocational (secondary) and technical (post-secondary non-university) training (FPT, for *formation professionnelle et technique*). In 2005, the ministry of education published a technical framework (MELS, 2005) that set out the main orientations of the ministry instruments to be used for VPL in FPT. This included interrelated documents, called instruments, for VPL counselors and content specialists as well as for candidates. It comprised, for each program, a description form, an assessment form used by content specialists, and a guide to the process for VPL services. This set of instruments is called "ministry instrumentation." The ministry instrumentation has been developed gradually, starting with programs where the number of applications was already high before the implementation of the harmonized approach, such as the secretarial studies program or the care assistance program. As long as ministry instrumentation does not exist in a program, institutions may use local tools.

When comparing the Québec VPL-VT with VPL in VT at the upper secondary level from other jurisdictions and published in English or French in the academic literature (Bélisle & Fernandez, 2018), two particularities stand out. First, further training is intertwined with the VPL process and can begin before the assessments of prior learning have been completed (see figure 1 below), moving closer to an andragogical approach where prior learning is taken into account in the continuation of a program (Bélisle & Mottais, 2018). Second, contrary to what is done in other VPL systems where the assessment in the VPL process is based on the description of prior learning (e.g., France), in writing or verbally, which is referred to as *mise en mots* (putting into words) (Bélisle & Rioux, 2016), this method is exceptional in Québec VPL-VT.
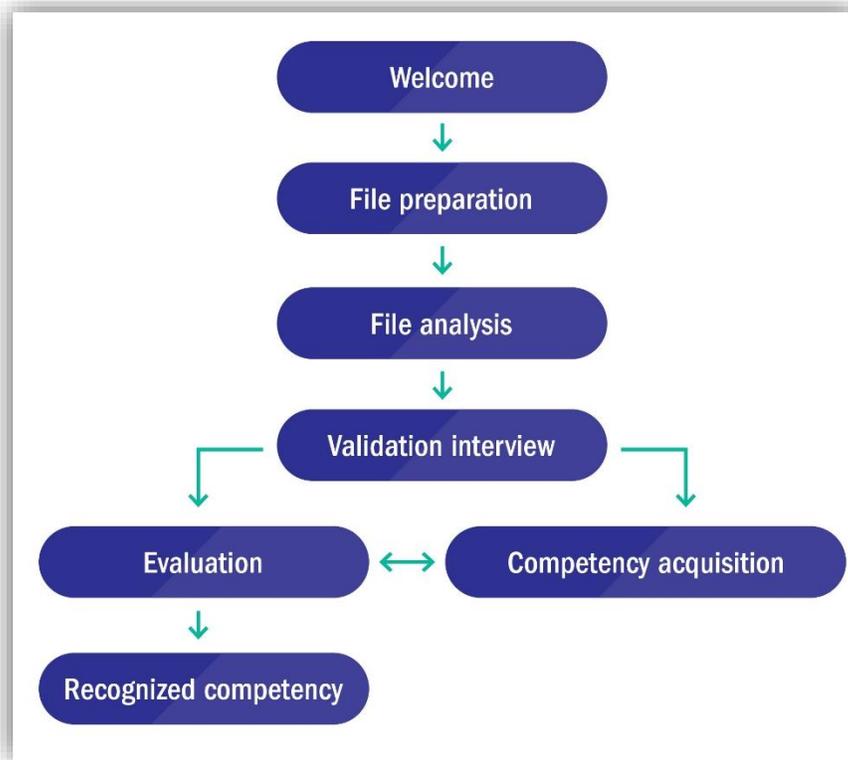
In 2014, to support the development of VPL in vocational training centers, the ministry designated five school boards[2] as centers of expertise in RAC, namely the CERAC-FPs. The CERAC-FPs work closely together and have a website for the general public (2022) and an intranet for professionals active in RAC-FP. The CERAC-FPs produce a newsletter in which they share community of practice success stories, regulatory and other details, training offers for counselors, content specialists, and managers, and other implementation support activities.

The ministry approach to VPL-VT in Québec involves a six- or seven-step process, depending on whether or not the candidate has to complete further training on one

or more competencies—referred to as the competency acquisition step—to obtain their diploma. Below we have reproduced a diagram of this process produced by the CERAC-FPs (2021).

Figure 1

Reproduction from CERAC-FP (2021), diagram of the VPL-VT process

VPL in the mining sector: context and methods
2.1 Continuous improvement of mining training

In Québec, and elsewhere, the mining sector is undergoing an important transformation and has a high demand for skilled workers who are curious and open to continuing to learn at work. Mining jobs in Québec are very well compensated, with important issues in terms of safety, work-life balance, and health, both physical and psychological (Pelletier et al., 2018).

While it is still possible for some men to be hired without a diploma if they have experience or excellent references from a relative already in a mining organization, several large mining companies require a diploma for entry-level positions (e.g., drilling helper) or for specialized ones (e.g., driller). The required diploma in these companies was for many years the one in general education: the secondary school diploma (high school diploma in other jurisdictions). Other employers, who do not require a diploma, hire on the basis of modular training in the mining sector (*formation modulaire du travailleur minier*- FMTM), a non-academic training

focusing on safety, compulsory for any mining underground worker. A DVS leading to a specialized trade (e.g., driller) requirement has therefore only relatively recently been employed or given access to some positions. In a survey conducted periodically among mining companies, in 2013 no respondent company said that their organization required a DVS when hiring, while in 2016, more than two-thirds (69%) said they did so (INMQ, 2017). Thus, there are still many experienced mining workers who do not have a DVS in their field of work, what we called a qualifying diploma (Bélisle & Fernandez, 2018). Instead, they learned to do their work by doing it or by completing short workplace training. According to the Mining Industry Human Resources Council (MiHR), prior to the pandemic and the context of increased labor shortages, nearly one-third of the Canadian mining workforce did not have a qualifying diploma, with 10% having no degree and 25% having only a general education degree (MiHR Council, 2019).[3]

Over the years, mining workers have had opportunities to participate in many continuing education activities pertaining to occupational health and safety requirements, environmental matters, and new equipment conduct and maintenance. Also, some communication training is done to promote safety and to support the hiring and employment integration of women, Indigenous people, and immigrants. Training is also done on the cultural safety of Indigenous communities where mining often takes place. This is moreover also a sector increasingly pervaded by digital technology, artificial intelligence, and the automation of certain operations (Bélisle & Supeno, 2022).

All this opens up opportunities to continue to learn in the workplace, and the Institut national des mines has taken an interest in VPL in the mining sector as a way to promote the continuous improvement of mining training and to respond to mining companies' higher demand for a DVS in the mining sector (Bélisle & Supeno, 2022). In the first stage of a research partnership with this institute and our university, we have documented the numbers of VPL candidates in four programs: 1) drilling; 2) ore extraction; 3) machine operations, mineral and metal processing; and 4) heavy machinery operation. That research confirmed the number of people taking advantage of the VPL process in the mining sector to still be very low: from 2014 to 2018, across three organizations, only 66 candidates began the process in the four programs and 32 obtained a DVS (Bélisle et al., 2019). Some of our conclusions were that there was an important need for better information on the VPL process in the mining sector and that institutions need arguments to convince workers to engage in the VPL process.

2.2 Research methods
The second stage of the partnership aimed to document the pathway of candidates before, during, and after the VPL process and to better understand the challenges faced by individuals and VET institutions. As the number of candidates was low, it seemed premature to investigate the impacts on companies.

We interviewed nine VPL candidates in a series of two or three interviews, each lasting just over an hour. These interviews occurred following the validation interview, after the completion of assessments, and again after the award of the diploma.[4] We also performed an administrative data analysis of the sequences between the steps of their VPL process from their information request (welcome step) to the date of confirmation of having successfully completed the program. These volunteers used the VPL service of three *centres de services scolaires* offering training in the mining sector during the years 2020 or 2021. The three programs in which they were enrolled were diamond drilling (600-hour program covering 11 competencies), ore extraction (930 hours covering 23 competencies), and forestry heavy equipment operation (630 hours covering 11 competencies) (Bélisle & Supeno, 2022). Their VPL process was impacted in some way by various effects of the pandemic (lockdown period, lack of access to sites, etc.). We also interviewed four VPL counselor/content specialist dyads, designated here as practitioners. Content specialists are former miners or operators who had become teachers. The duration of this interview with the dyads was a little over two hours each. This research meets the ethical requirements for academic research in Canada. Information is presented in a way that does not identify individuals or employers, and names are fictitious.

Some results on VPL pathways in the mining sector

Interviews on the candidates' pathways focused on their belonging to the mining world, what brought them to the VPL service, including their motivations for engaging with it, their participation in the process, and the changes in their personal and professional lives that affected it, as well as the results obtained during and after the process.

3.1 Before the process: motivations

Our study confirms that the motivations documented in particular in French VPL (e.g., Kogut-Kubiak et al., 2006) are present in the Québec mining sector. Motivations related to advancement (the desire to take on new challenges, secure better employment or working conditions, obtain a new position, or achieve internal or external upward mobility) were the most frequent in the comments of the people we met with. The motivations may also involve career change. Three experienced miners stated that they were pursuing VPL to be able to teach vocational training in the mining field and one person, working in roads, was motivated by the fact that mining companies hire people who have a DVS in a field in which this individual already had experience with a few machines. In one case, the primary motivation was to secure employment conditions, i.e., in a case where the miner was engaging in VPL after a layoff in the hope that the DVS would allow him to return to conditions similar to the ones that were lost. Only two candidates had the same employer, but their position and their VET program were different.

3.2 During the process: steps
3.2.1 Welcome
Individuals are welcomed to the VPL process in a personalized way. People came to the VPL service after hearing about it from someone close to them, from their new employer (in the case of miners who become teachers), or after discovering the existence of this service, somewhat by chance, after becoming interested in the training program. Upon being welcomed, individuals are informed of the steps in the process and are given description forms for the program in question to complete at home. What concerns people at this stage is establishing how realistic the process is. Their questions vary from person to person, but generally concern how much they will need to pay for the process, the time required for travel (mining training is given in only a few centers and may be remote from the individual's residence or workplace), the time of year/week when it takes place and how long it will be. Some people are surprised that further training (competency acquisition step) is free[5] since it requires the use of expensive machinery and an experienced person to oversee it.

> They really get it mixed up with the private sector, which you sometimes hear about with those $50,000 courses. So you tell them, "No, no, it's the ministry [that bears the costs]." Sometimes that motivates them even more (Martin-practitioner).[6]

Moreover, given that each pathway is different, there is no one-size-fits-all answer, and centers, like individuals, have varying constraints. Both sides need to have some tolerance for uncertainty, especially if further training is required.

3.2.2 File preparation
The second step is to prepare the candidate's file, including their resume, a completed description form, and other documents (e.g., documents confirming citizenship or permanent residence, proof of explosives permit). This form includes the tasks associated with each of the competencies in the program at hand. The individual is asked to check off whether they can complete the task described, are unable to complete the task, or need more information. In this second step of the VPL process, some candidates remember hesitating on some words in French, because they used English terms at work.

> I know there are things I wasn't sure of, especially the terms. Because, at work, there are English expressions, and all that. (Nicolas-candidate, I1)[7]

For example, in the description form Nicolas had read: "À partir d'un banc d'emprunt, utiliser une chargeuse sur roues (*loader*) pour charger des matériaux dans un tombereau [...]" (MELS, 2013, p. 22).[8] The words "banc d'emprunt" and

"tomberau" are specialized French vocabulary that students have to learn, but in the workplace the words "pit" or "dumper" seem to be more common.

3.2.3 File analysis

The file is then analyzed by the school organization's VPL team, usually the counselor and a program content specialist. They make sure that the file is complete and that the candidate has everything they need to move forward with the process. If the file is deemed admissible, the candidate is invited to a validation interview.

3.2.4 Validation interview

The validation interview may be conducted by a VPL counselor, but most often it is held by a content specialist experienced in teaching in the program. The ministry asks that the person conducting the interview "decide whether there is sufficient evidence to presume that a competency has been acquired or mastered" (MELS, 2005, p. 6). This is where the team can judge whether the candidate is ready to take the VPL assessments, whether the candidate's competencies need to be upgraded (often called partial training) prior to the VPL assessment, or whether the candidate needs to be fully trained in one or more of the program competencies (called complete training).

> Well, me, [first name of the VPL counselor], he told me that with the knowledge I have, he said that with a hundred hours, I should be good to finish my DVS. He told me: "You might be able to do it before that" (Camille-candidate, I1)

3.2.5 Evaluation

At the VPL-VT assessment stage, the candidate has to demonstrate or supply proof that they meet the entry-level requirements for the trade covered by the program. If the person does not achieve the required task, they are encouraged to continue their training. Failure is not possible in the Québec VPL-VT. The assessment procedures (called conditions for recognition) in VPL in the mining sector are mainly based on an interview with a content specialist, followed or preceded by the performance of specific tasks. For example, three experienced miners were obtaining their diploma through the VPL-VT program in the ore extraction program, following a two-day assessment at a partner mine of the training center. They successfully completed tasks associated with the program competencies and answered the questions of the content specialist, who was an experienced miner and had been teaching mining training for several years.

> [First and last name of the content specialist] was kind of in charge here, underground. It allowed him to see how I was mucking, he analyzed me a bit on that. […] This allowed me to get on a machine and do a little demonstration to see how comfortable I was with it.

> *[...] He would come and ask me questions about it (Denis, candidate, I2)*

The remaining five individuals we met in the last research interview completed VPL assessments before and after further training activities.

3.2.6 Competency acquisition

The people met with who were engaged in further training (called competency acquisition) had one to six competencies to develop. The possible training activities varied. For example, reading may be required before hands-on training with heavy machinery or for the module on geology principles in ore extraction. While some individuals mentioned having read the documents or asked questions of a geologist colleague, others seem to have skipped this personal preparation and relied on their reflexes during practice. The most common training is indeed practice in a suitable space, at the training center or in a place dedicated to learning, under the close supervision of a teacher or technician. Individuals with access to machinery at their workplace may be encouraged to seek permission from the employer to practice with an experienced colleague. Some colleagues offer themselves as a mentor.

> *He [a colleague] knew that I was doing my DVS [...] He gave me a lot of pointers, a lot of expertise, a lot of things. (Camille - candidate, I3)*

Further training is, in general, appreciated by the people who engage in it and whom we met. Guidance from training staff, coupled with a solid foundation in the trade, is conducive to further learning. In addition to the development of required competencies that the individual does not have at the time of undertaking the process, this training can support other learning; at least this is the opinion of candidates and content specialists. This training, or sometimes the assessment interview with the content specialist, can help adjust practices developed in on-the-job learning, such as precautions to avoid premature equipment wear. In the heavy equipment operation or drilling programs, a VPL candidate may join a small group of students undergoing their initial training. This helps to optimize the availability of equipment and the practical training teacher. The competency acquisition can occur before the evaluation step on other competencies (see figure 1 in section 1). Because they already have experience in the field, VPL candidates, for example, a candidate who worked as a helper, can learn faster than students who are not yet used to the mining environment or to the safety tasks (e.g., locking out machinery during maintenance).

> *I'm able to have an image in my mind, because I know [the work to be done]. I would answer questions, tell anecdotes, and make*

> *jokes. The younger people around me didn't understand. It was just*
> *me and the teacher laughing. (Brian-candidate, I1)*

As the practical training is in the field, practitioners said that evaluation can be scheduled when a teacher judges that the candidate is ready to undergo evaluation. In the ore extraction program, workers find that one or two competencies in the competency framework concern uses that no longer exist in the "modern mine" where they work or have worked. This observation echoes that of VPL teams who readily admit that ministry programs do not always keep up with the changes in the world of work.

> *There are mines that control these machines from the surface.*
> *Everything has improved, all this remote work. But the training that*
> *we did, that's with the muck machines, it's the conventional mines.*
> *It's like someone going back in time (Nader-candidate, I3).*

3.2.7 Recognized competency

Once a competency has been assessed, the content specialist must produce a summary to be able to record a pass mark in the candidate's file. This pass is then transcribed into an information technology system and once all competencies are passed, the system triggers the issuance of the diploma by the Ministère de l'Éducation. The diploma will take several weeks to deliver, but the center can issue a confirmation if the person needs proof to apply for a given position.

At the time of completing the research report in January 2022 (Bélisle & Supeno, 2022), seven out of nine individuals had obtained their diploma, one had stopped the process before completing the assessments, and one was continuing the process intending to earn their diploma as soon as possible.[9]

For many of them, the VPL process was much shorter than they anticipated, and candidates find that the VPL process requires them to invest far fewer hours than the stated length of the program (in this case 600, 630, or 900 hours). The overall length of the process, for the seven individuals who graduated through VPL in our study, ranged from 2 weeks to nearly 44 weeks. The average was about 5 months, in a pandemic context and in a research setting where stakeholders knew that the research team was documenting the length of the process. The shortest durations were for the pathways of candidates who had no further training to complete. Based on the information we were given, we can estimate that these individuals invested less than 30 hours in the process, aside from their travel. For the others, the number of hours varied according to the length of the further training. We can estimate that individuals had to invest about 100 hours for the whole process, excluding travel time.

3.3 Organizational challenges

Overall, our study confirms various ongoing challenges of VPL-VT in the mining sector, many of which relate to its costs for *centres de services scolaires*. Also, the availability of equipment, the advancement of work sites according to the competency to be evaluated, as well as the weather conditions pose significant headaches for VPL services.

> *Someone who came to me in January with an application for validation of prior learning: there were no operations until March. [...] If it was urgent, well, that's when I had to open a worksite, move machines, go get my teaching resource. (Lisa- practitioner)*

Compounding these issues are the working hours of mine personnel, often 12-hour days for 7, 14, or 21 days in a row, and work on remote mine sites, in some cases on a fly-in fly-out basis.

3.4 Achievement of individual goals

Candidates in the final interview of our study all reported being glad they went through the VPL-VT process, and some said they would have done so before if they had known that it existed. In the opinion of all three groups of people interviewed, the information on VPL provided to the public and employers is inadequate in Québec.

Candidates consider that VPL, including training where applicable, has helped them achieve their goal or that they are well on their way to doing so.[10] One individual achieved their goal even before having their diploma, as their employer noticed their diligence and gave them access to the desired position as long as the individual continued the VPL-VT process.

> *Because we have situations where workers have been working in the processing plant for a few years, but they don't have a diploma. Then a new worker comes along who has less seniority, and ultimately, because he has the diploma, has access to all the positions. [...] Speaking of my [VPL] process, other workers want to earn their diploma with the validation of prior learning. The employer seems to be enthusiastic about this (Nicolas-candidate, I3)*

In all cases where the primary motivations are job-related, when digging a little deeper, we find that underlying these are personal or family concerns that may be associated with personal development and well-being. For instance, a new father might apply for a less dangerous job with his new diploma, or another might settle in a city with a variety of available services and try to attract his wife who had remained located further south. Teaching, while generally less well paid,[11] is seen as

an early retirement even by relatively young people who have experienced extreme work situations (e.g., working at -78 ° outside).

Thus, the motivations are often related to various needs in other spheres of life than work. In addition, in the pursuit of career advancement, candidates already working in the mining sector place little focus on salary increases. They are aware that their salary is at the top of the ladder in Québec. Instead, they are attracted by the possibility of having new responsibilities and working with equipment that sparks their curiosity and their enjoyment of learning and working. Their interest has to do with the work itself, what sociologists call the expressive part of the relationship to work (e.g., Côté, 2013).

VPL and lifelong learning

The second stage of the research partnership with Institut national des mines confirms that there is still much to do to better inform workers and employers of the existence of VPL in the mining sector. It confirms the benefits of VPL-VET for adults, particularly in their career advancement and as a new opportunity to learn. It also encourages the *centres de services scolaires* to better highlight the lifelong learning dimension of their VPL services.

In this section, I would like to briefly discuss the place of learning in the VPL-VT process in Québec. VPL, in general, is about recognizing the learning of people who do not wait to be in the classroom to learn and who are able to seize opportunities in non-formal and informal settings. At several points in our research interviews, curiosity and the joy of learning, including a love of the trade and action, were significant.

In its developmental function (Butterworth, 1992), VPL can contribute to consolidating prior learning and VPL can be considered a form of pedagogy (Cooper & Ralphs, 2016). However, this developmental function of VPL is often overlooked in Québec's VPL-VT, whether in the discourse of the government, the ministries concerned (mainly the ministries of education, labor, and immigration), or even in that of many people working in *centres de service scolaires*. In the most common discourse on VPL-VT, in Québec and elsewhere (Bélisle & Fernandez, 2018), it is the instrumental function of the VPL-VT that is emphasized, i.e., the fact that it allows for earning credits or a diploma in less time.

The emphasis on lowering the amount of time and effort that needs to be invested, rather than helping to consolidate new competencies by building on those already mastered, may contribute to the notion that VPL results in discounted degrees or a "free pass." This was reported by interviewees who had heard this in their settings and has even been expressed by candidates. This may also contribute to the perception that VPL is fuelling the privatization of the education world (Bélisle & Mottais, 2021).

However, our study clearly indicates that people who must go through the competency acquisition step are learning during the VPL process. In addition, VPL assessments can have a formative dimension, and here and there, interviewees mentioned a "tip" that the content specialist gave in their feedback on the assessment activity. However, the role of VPL in lifelong learning has not been emphasized by Québec actors to date. This seems paradoxical given the explicit inclusion of VPL in the 2002 lifelong learning policy (Gouvernement du Québec, 2002).

In the update of that 2002 policy, requested by a number of actors in Québec civil society, it seems necessary to pursue further research and to include actions to make VPL-VT better known in terms of the changes it makes in people's lives and in their development. In this way, VPL might truly be placed within a lifelong learning perspective focused on the development of individuals and work collectives.

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[1] Although Québec is part of the Canadian federation, it has a strong Francophone identity—French is the official language—and adult education, employment, and official recognition of prior learning (RPL) are under Québec jurisdiction. Many official documents are therefore translated into English for the English communities. We refer to these documents when they exist.

[2] In 2020, French-language school boards became school service centers (*centres de service scolaires*), while English-language boards continued to be referred to as such. These organizations are responsible for public preschool, primary, and secondary education in the Québec education system. Vocational training is one of the three sectors of secondary education. The other two are youth general education and general adult education.

[3] In the context of the current shortage in Québec, it can be assumed that employers are easing hiring requirements and that VPL will be able to help along the retention of staff who show the aptitudes and interest to continue working in the sector.

[4] In some cases, assessments were done very quickly after the validation interview and both steps were documented in the same interview. One candidate participated in the first interview only.

[5] In Québec, VPL, including further training, is free at the secondary level but applicants must assume some costs at the college and university levels.

[6] The interviews were in French. We strived, in the translation, to maintain the level of language.

[7] I1 means that the quote is an extract of Interview 1, after the validation interview step, I3, in Interview 3, after obtaining the diploma.

[8] Translated freely into English: "From a borrow pit, use a wheel loader to load materials into a dumper [...]."

[9] In autumn 2022, that candidate informed the research team that it was impossible yet to finish the competency acquisition step, considering the manpower shortage and their loaded schedule at work. His task was to obtain the diploma in 2023. There is no deadline for the VPL-VT process and we know, from other research (Bélisle et al., 2022), that people can take eight years to complete the process.

[10] In three cases, few days elapsed between the end of the program and the last research interview.

[11] In Québec's vocational training system, teachers are required to have a DVS in the field in which they will be teaching, which generates a certain number of VPL applications. People do teach without the "legal" qualification of a bachelor's degree. To obtain this degree, they must pursue university studies, which leads them to tenure. Many prefer to stay on contract.

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Thanks to Joachim Lépine, certified translator, for the translation from French to English.