European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning 2010
Country Report: Estonia

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1 NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

1.1 National legal framework, system or policy on validation

In Estonia, principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning (also known as Recognition of Prior Learning, RPL) have been developed and are now regulated by higher education and vocational education legislation. The RPL principles are generally also used in the system for awarding professional qualifications. In the field of general education, the RPL system has thus far not been initiated. Institutions providing non-formal education have also not been involved in the implementation of RPL principles.

The goal of validation in Estonia is to enhance the links between different levels of education and the labour market. The concept of assessment of prior experiential learning encompasses the idea of lifelong learning and the notion that learning is valuable no matter where or when it has been acquired.

RPL can be used in Estonia for:

- Admission to a higher education institution for fulfilling entrance requirements. This is only valid if the applicant has a certain previous level of education (e.g. high school diploma, bachelor or masters degree, depending on the level of study applied for);
- Continuing studies in higher education and vocational education;
- Changing curriculum of study in higher education and vocational education;
- Achieving a professional qualification.

National Legal framework

The University act

The 2003 University Act allowed up to 50 % of higher education programmes to be obtained through RPL. From September 2007 there has been no limitation but it is stated that higher education institutions cannot award whole diplomas or certificates on the basis of prior and experiential learning. In practice, this means that the whole of the curriculum may be recognised on the basis of prior learning, except the thesis or final examination (which has to be defended at the corresponding university).

Validation can also be used for access to university - replacing the necessary entrance qualifications, except for first degree level entry. The entrance requirements for postgraduate qualifications could state for example that the candidate should have a previous degree in the same area of studies or work experience in the field of study. If the applicant has previous studies in a different field but has relevant work experience or has completed additional training courses, these could fulfil the requirements. Nevertheless, an application for validation is valid only if the applicant has a certain level of completed previous education. If the student has not completed undergraduate studies he/she is not eligible to apply for master level studies – so validation refers mainly to the subject area rather than level of education.

The University Act requires that universities accredit prior and experiential learning and obliges them to elaborate their own rules and procedures for RPL. Since 2007, the rules and purposes of RPL have been set out in major principles by The Standard of Higher Education (see below). This requires the Universities update and standardise their regulations.
Professions Act

The new Professions Act which will serve as the basis for significant changes in the Estonian system of professional qualifications took effect on 1 September 2008. It means a transition from the five-stage professional system to an eight-stage lifelong learning qualifications framework that combines educational and professional qualifications. All professional standards and the principles of awarding professional qualifications will also be reviewed. In the context of validation, the act clarifies the process of acquiring professional qualification standards and states the responsibility of the professional body (e.g. procedures of assessing and validating competences).

The Standard of Higher Education

The framework document, ‘The Standard of Higher Education’ (Kõrgharidusstandard – 1996; 2002; 2007), specifies requirements for higher education in Estonia and is a fundamental legal act concerning the granting of education licences and accreditation of study programmes or higher education institutions. The Standard of Higher Education is based on other acts related to higher education and is valid for all stages and forms of higher education, irrespective of the ownership or the legal status of the higher education institution. The Standard of Higher Education also sets a very broad framework for common RPL implementation regulations and states that all higher education institutions need to have RPL regulations within the institution. RPL regulations were the first step towards formalising the process of RPL within universities, as RPL might have been used beforehand without formal requirements. The process therefore varied greatly in different universities as well as within one institution.

Vocational Education Standard

This is a framework document for vocational education that sets out general principles for validation. The standard states the aim of the validation process, common principles that all vocational education institutions need to follow and general rules for the assessment and recognition of validation in vocational education. In accordance with the set procedures validation can be used for admission to fulfil entrance requirements and continuing studies in vocational education. According to the standard, vocational education institutions have to assure the quality of validation process by providing information for the applicant and quality assuring the assessment.

National Strategy documents:

There are three strategy documents for the period 2009-2013 / 2006-2015, relating to adult, vocational and higher education. Each of these contains a number of references to the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), as outlined below. These strategy documents set out goals and the activities which should be carried out in order to meet the goals. They do not set out specific guidelines on validation, rather confirm its recognition as an important tool for adult education in Estonia.

Development Plan for Estonian Adult Education 2009-2013

Within this development plan, activities related to RPL include:

- The principles of RPL will be developed and implemented in adult general education studies;
- Proposals will be made to legalise RPL rules for vocational education institutions and the implementation of RPL will be extended;
- Implementation of RPL in educational institutions for higher education will be continued;
- A new vision for the improvement of RPL will be developed;
• Opportunities to obtain secondary education without completing the required level of basic education will be created for people without basic education (for people aged 22+ in general education and for people aged 20+ in vocational education);

• People without higher education will be given the opportunity to apply for the second level of higher education through RPL.

*Development Plan for the Estonian Vocational Education and Training System, 2009-2013*

Activities related to RPL include:

• Amending legislation and applying RPL in VET. RPL will have been adopted by law and implemented; recognition of qualifications will be flexible and will encourage labour mobility;

• Developing a system of awarding professional and partial qualifications on the basis of RPL;

• A pilot round of RPL-based awarding of professional qualifications will be carried out; results will be available for methodology improvement.

*Estonian Higher Education Strategy, 2006–2015*

In order to make higher education more accessible and to include non-traditional learners in the higher education system, measures will be developed which will enable the combination of studies, work and family life, and which take into account previous studies and work experience, as a significant part of completing the study programme. Universities will be autonomous in determining the conditions for entry and graduation.

1.2 Relationship with the existing/ developing qualifications framework and information on standards used for validation

*The National Qualifications Framework*

The professional qualifications system forms part of the Estonian qualifications system which links the educational system and the labour market and endorses lifelong learning and the development of professional competence, assessment, recognition and comparison.

According to the Professions Act, the Estonian qualifications framework (EKR) has eight levels. Descriptions of the qualifications levels in the EKR are identical to the EQF level descriptions. The aim of the EKR is to develop a framework that encompasses all qualifications in formal education (general, vocational, higher and adult education) as well as vocational and professional qualifications. All the descriptions are competence or outcomes based and thus enable non-formal and informal learning to be taken into account.

For example if a learner wishes to apply for an adult educator’s professional qualification standard, he/she must demonstrate how he/she has acquired the competences outlined in the standard for this qualification, i.e. through formal education, work experience, etc.

The quality criteria and procedures for referencing the EKR to the EQF foresee two cases of referencing qualifications to the EKR: “including into the EKR” and “describing the position in the EKR” or assigning the EKR level. Only state-recognised qualifications are included in the EKR. The EKR level can be assigned to qualifications which have not yet received state recognition or to qualifications with undefined conditions of recognition, e.g. partial qualifications or individual competences.

The state-recognised qualifications must:

• Be defined in a learning outcomes based qualification standard (curriculum or professional standard), meeting the requirements of the national framework standard(s) (if applicable);
• Have a state recognised awarding institution (educational institution, professional association, etc.).

Qualifications to be incorporated into the Estonian qualifications framework (EKR) belong to the following types:

• Higher education qualifications;
• VET qualifications;
• General education qualifications;
• Professional qualifications.

Educational and Professional Standards

The higher education standard (HES) serves as a framework standard for higher education qualifications. This standard describes the credit system based on ECTS and the principles of accrediting previous experiential learning; it formulates generalised learning outcomes and assigns the EKR levels to higher education qualifications. Descriptions of generalised learning outcomes follow the logic of the Dublin descriptors but do not replicate them.

Estonian higher education institutions have prepared new learning outcomes based curricula for the academic year 2009/2010. These curricula have to comply with the corresponding generalised learning outcomes of the HES and the corresponding professional standard if applicable. The HES describes generalised learning outcomes on the basic (minimum) level, whereas attainment above that level is graded on the appropriate scale. The principles and procedures of assessment are defined in the corresponding ministerial decree.

Higher education institutions are the qualification awarding institutions. Conditions and procedures for the accreditation of qualifications and qualification awarding institutions are set out in the University Act and the Applied Higher Education Institution Act. Higher education institutions are entitled to award state recognised academic degrees and diplomas corresponding to the accredited study programmes.

The vocational education standard (VES) serves as a framework standard for vocational education qualifications. This standard describes the principles of RPL, formulates generalised learning outcomes and assigns the EKR levels to vocational education qualifications. Generalised learning outcomes descriptions have been developed based on the Recommendation and the EKR level descriptions. As in the HES, generalised learning outcomes are described on the basic level, whereas attainment above that level is graded on the appropriate scale.

Professional qualifications occupy a significantly different space to educational qualifications. Professional certificates are issued to people who have passed professional examinations where the skills, knowledge and personal qualities required for working in a specific profession are assessed. Thus, the professional qualifications system is an interface between the labour market and the lifelong learning system. The system is developed and administered by the Estonian Qualifications Authority (Kutsekoda). During the period 2008-2013 the development is being accomplished through the framework of the European Social Fund (ESF) sponsored programme, "Development of the professional qualifications system".

However, according to the Vocational Education Standard, vocational students have the right to take the relevant professional examination instead of the vocational graduation

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1 For more information see http://www.jointquality.nl/
examination. A graduate of a vocational educational institution can take a professional examination free of charge within a year of graduation.²

Professional qualifications are divided across 16 professional areas. The Professions Act defines a common five-level professional qualifications framework. The professional qualifications register contains more than 700 qualifications. These are based on the corresponding professional standards, a part of which are learning outcomes (competence) based. The Professional Qualifications Council decides on the need for a new qualification and approves the corresponding standard. There is no framework for professional standards. Guidelines for developing a professional standard are settled in the ministerial decree. All new professional standards will be learning outcomes based.

Awarding institutions, mostly professional associations, are nominated by the professional councils. Awarding institutions may have one or more awarding committees. At the moment there are 86 awarding institutions and 152 awarding committees.

The Professions Act envisages the possibility of combining graduation from an educational institution with the awarding of the primary professional qualification starting from the year 2011 (provided that the study programme corresponds to the professional standard and is accredited). This means that in some instances educational institutions can be the awarding institution for professional qualifications.

RPL can be used for obtaining professional qualifications. General guidelines for recognising prior learning in awarding professional qualifications were set out in 2008 (compiled by Aili Saluveer). In other areas such as higher education and vocational education, RPL procedures and regulations are in place in each institution.

1.3 National institutional framework

Common principles for RPL implementation have been developed in 2010. The working group on RPL principles involved the following representatives: higher education institutions (universities, applied higher education), vocational education institutions, the Ministry of Education and Research, and the Estonian Qualifications Authority. This working group was compiled for developing RPL principles and is no longer active. Work was initiated by the ESF funded project, Primus³ RPL activity.

There is no national institution with responsibility for validation. Current developments in higher education are led by the ESF-funded project ‘Primus’ and its office; validation in qualification standards is coordinated by Estonian Qualifications Authority and in vocational education the developments are led by National Examinations and Qualifications Centre.

Based on the legal framework, all higher education, “applied higher education” and vocational education institutions have a set of regulations for recognition of prior learning in place.

1.4 Division of responsibilities (national, regional, local, provider level) according to the different aspects of validation

The Ministry of Education and Research has responsibility for the legal framework.

Educational providers carry responsibility for RPL regulations and procedures within the institutions. Institutions must have RPL processes in place, provide guidance for learners, undertake assessments, assure the quality of the process and provide information.

The Estonian Qualifications Authority is responsible for RPL implementation in awarding professional qualifications in cooperation with awarding institutions. For example, the professional qualification standard for adult educators is awarded by Andras – the

² http://www.hm.ee/index.php?1510011
³ http://primus.archimedes.ee/
Association of Estonian Adult Educators. The awarding body is responsible for applying the principles of RPL in the process of awarding the qualification.

1.5 Examples of regional, local or EU funded initiatives

The ESF project Primus has an initiative for RPL development in Estonian higher education. The aim of the project is to raise the quality of higher education. The project aims to raise the capacity of higher education institutions to assess and recognise prior learning. It comprises the following activities:

- Supporting networking among RPL specialists and counsellors;
- Supporting RPL assessors and counsellors;
- Bringing together different RPL stakeholders;
- Circulating information and promoting RPL; and
- Collecting statistics on RPL.

The programme budget for the RPL activities (2008-2013) is 22.9 million EEK (1.46 million EUR).

The ESF project “Development of vocational education 2008-2013” includes an initiative for RPL in vocational education. Training courses for RPL assessors and counsellors are funded, as well as RPL being promoted in the VET system. There is close cooperation with the Primus project for higher education, for example in the development of the common RPL principles.

1.6 Link between validation and the existing/ developing credit system, unit-based or modularised structure of qualifications

Since 1 September 2009, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) has been fully implemented as a national credit system in Estonia. In the ECTS, the study load for one academic year is 60 ECTS credits. Until 31 August 2008, the University Act enabled parallel usage of both systems – the national system and the ECTS.

All courses taught at higher education institutions must end with an examination or a pass/fail assessment. There may be several independent examinations in separate parts of the course. At the end of each semester, during a four-week examination session, there are usually oral and written examinations.

Many non-formal education providers (e.g. in-service training) also use the credit system in certificates of attendance for participants, which describe the course content, learning outcomes and credit points earned. Also, course programmes are learning outcomes based which makes RPL assessment easier.

In higher education ECTS credits are awarded as a result of validation. The amount of credits awarded depends on the application but in general there are no limits on the amount of credits awarded. The only limitation is that the final thesis or exam cannot be awarded through validation. ECVET has not yet been applied to vocational education in Estonia thus no credits are awarded for learning in this sector.

1.7 Funding framework

Most of the funding for RPL development in higher education is through the ESF project Primus. The budget for the RPL activities (2008-2013) is 22.9 million EEK (1.46 million EUR). Project partners and higher education institutions must contribute 5% of their own funding. Funding covers training courses for assessors, counsellors, applicants, the cost of assessment and counselling, information campaigns and other related activities such as the development of specific portfolios and study visits.
RPL applicants in some higher education institutions have to pay a fee which varies by institution. Certain institutions charge a fee based on the amount of credit points that they apply for while for others there is a simple application fee with no additional credit point charge. Overall, the system for measuring RPL costs is going to be developed as part of the Primus project.

Funding for developing RPL in vocational education is, similar to higher education, funded by the ESF programme. Funding is primarily for training validation practitioners and RPL promotion.

The ESF Project "Development of a professional qualifications system" for the period 2008-2013, has funding for the development of the system of crediting professions. This funding is being used to develop principles and in 15 domains the APEL-based crediting of professions is being piloted (for further detail see http://www.kutsekoda.ee/en/kutsekoda/esf20082013). Applicants for professional qualification standards pay a fee which depends on the area of qualification.

1.8 Data on flows of beneficiaries

Based on RPL statistics collected by the Primus project in 2009, there were in total 6,986 RPL applications in higher education. 403 applications were unfulfilled, either because there was insufficient evidence or because the prior learning was not deemed to be sufficient. Most of the applications (4,728) were applying for recognition of prior formal studies. The next largest group of applications (900) related to the validation of non-formal learning such as continuing professional development training. 568 applications were for informal learning (e.g. work experience). 655 applications were for using RPL to fulfil admission criteria.

A breakdown of the data is not available centrally for all the higher education institutions - additional data may be recorded in different higher education institutions. Current statistical information can be found at http://primus.archimedes.ee/node/54.

There is no data available about validation beneficiaries in vocational education, adult education or qualification standards.

2 ORGANISATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

2.1 Role of the formal education and training sector, including providers

As indicated above (section 1.4), educational providers (in higher education and vocational education) have responsibility for their own RPL regulations and procedures. Institutions must have RPL processes in place, provide guidance for learners, undertake assessments, assure the quality of the process and provide information.

Most of the RPL developments in Estonia are in the higher education sector, due to the extensive funding from the ESF programme. The first programme period in 2005-2008 included the project LÜKKA - Project to increase the competition capacity of university graduates through the development of quality of study activities. The main activities of this RPL sub-project were:

- The mapping of the situation of the 'system of taking into account the previous studies and work experience and the conduct of research';

http://www.ut.ee/lykka/
The creation of collaboration networks of universities and other educational institutions and the elaboration of integral principles of the ‘system to take into account previous studies and work experience’;

The delivery of training for the ‘system to take into account previous studies and work experience’;

The creation of the mechanisms to support the system to take into account the previous studies and work experience’ for students, teaching staff, advisers and tutors;

The wider introduction of the ‘system to take into account previous studies and work experience’.

As a result of ESF projects, higher education institutions have had close cooperation in developing RPL. However, differences between institutions do occur.

Based on the analysis of RPL regulations in six public universities, RPL can be seen as a great challenge for universities (Gross 2009). There is a lack of confidence in the ability of learners/applicants to learn outside higher education and in particular there is a lack of confidence in whether the learning is of the same level as higher education studies. The quality and legitimacy of RPL are issues of concern for most of the higher education institutions and many restraints are thus set for learners and their learning. Formal learning or studies carry a higher value in the RPL process compared to non-formal or informal learning. Informal learning is hardly mentioned at all in any regulations. The RPL process as a metaphor in Estonian higher education institutions can be named as “technical transfer”. Regulations are concerned with how “transfers” of learning outcomes and grades occur, but are not concerned with learning.

2.2 Role of existing information, advice and guidance networks / institutions

As noted previously, educational providers have responsibility for providing information on their own RPL regulations and procedures. In addition a website dedicated to RPL that gathers, hosts and links all RPL-related information is run by the Primus programme (see http://vota.archimedes.ee/).

In addition, Rajaleidja www.rajaleidja.ee (Path finder) is a web-based solution for career planning and guidance. This virtual environment has been divided to three main sections: Youth – information for young people on finding learning opportunities in Estonia and abroad, helping young people to understand the labour market and its options, providing initial career guidance; Adult – career guidance, database of training courses provided for adults, information on various training opportunities; Guide – information for career counsellors and parents. The Rajaleidja virtual environment is provided by the National Resource Centre for Guidance, which has state funding.

Rajaleidja provides a large variety of information concerning labour market and learning opportunities, helping people to see available choices. There are regional career guidance centres in Estonia and the web-service gives information about those. There is no real-time online guidance, but an opportunity to email concerning questions.

2.3 Validation in the private sector and the role of private sector actors

Currently, RPL processes in Estonia are led by the formal education sector. Different ways of involving employers in assessment processes are being considered. Employers are part of assessment processes in more technical areas and also in the ICT area. It is also possible for institutions to obtain funds for including employers in assessment procedures from the Primus programme.

Professional standards assessment is carried out by an awarding body which usually consists of employers’ representatives.
As noted in the 2007 European Inventory report for Estonia, Employers have always appreciated prior formal, non-formal and informal learning upon hiring people and valued work experience as well as other skills, personal characteristics and abilities. The main tool used for first evaluation is the review of the candidate’s CV and an interview following this. Most companies have worked out a personnel policy and internal rules for measuring the potential of the applicant, although these are not available publicly.

In the labour market two main trends are evident: on the one hand, great attention is paid to official qualifications in some situations, on the other hand, work experience is valued more than a university degree.

Requirements for professional qualifications have been worked out or elaborated for many professions. Several qualification requirements became more difficult to achieve. In some public service occupations an official degree (Master’s degree) enables employees to receive a salary that is 10% higher than the salary for first degree graduates.

In many cases, as already advanced, employers value work experience more than a university degree. Several reasons for this can be found, for example, a rapidly changing labour market that values recent work experience over ‘old’ (i.e. usually that means acquired before 1990) education; many SME (small and medium enterprises) managers have not themselves completed a university degree and therefore do not value it; new and rather liberal regulations have resulted in a plethora of new HE institutions being established during the last ten years which are considered to be of low quality and whose education provision is therefore not valued.

Employers are interested in certifying employees’ skills as this is important for staff policy development, for the benchmarking of the company and for competitiveness in the market. As mentioned above, today the main activity is setting occupational standards. The Professions Act provides the basis for the development of the requirements for professional qualifications and the conditions and procedures for the attestation and award of professional qualifications.

### 2.4 Validation in the third sector and the role of third sector actors

The third sector is involved mostly in awarding professional qualification standards as awarding bodies. For those active in the third sector, who wish to have their skills validated, this is possible through the methods outlined previously in this report. For example, a Youth Worker (vocational) title can be obtained largely through work experience (paid or unpaid).

In addition, the Estonian Non-formal Adult Education Association (ENAEA) has been involved in international cooperation projects related to RPL. For example, Flexi-Path is a Leonardo da Vinci Project of the EU Lifelong Learning Programme. With international cooperation between seven partners from all over Europe, a validation instrument to certify adult educator competencies will be developed. Flexi-Path will facilitate the transparency and recognition of adult educator qualifications across Europe, making them comparable by having a common reference (EQF) and a common Master adult educator profile which promotes the idea of mobility through standardised educational programmes and qualification levels (http://www.flexi-path.eu/).

A Volunteer Pass is also being developed by Volunteering Development Estonia. It is used for recording experiences obtained through participation in volunteering.

### 2.5 Costs to organisations

There are staff costs associated with the implementation of RPL and in most of the higher education institutions there is a full-time or part-time RPL coordinator or counsellor. Assessors and counsellors do not work full-time for RPL, but rather this is one of the work assignments in the job description.
Currently funding mainly comes from the ESF programme in higher education, vocational education and awarding professional standards.

3 INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVE

3.1 Awareness-raising and recruitment

As noted above, there is an RPL information website in place: http://vota.archimedes.ee/. The website has information for RPL applicants, assessors and counsellors. The RPL process is explained thoroughly and guidance material can be found on the site. Also, an e-course has been developed by Tallinn University of Technology, for self-learning about the RPL process, as described in the box below.

Tallinn University of Technology, online introductory course for RPL applicants

The online course for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) applicants was set up in 2009. The course is aimed at adult learners and provides a ‘walk-through’ of the RPL process. Topics covered in the course include:

- Self-analysis
- Setting goals
- Career planning
- Europass CV
- RPL process and procedures
- Self-motivation.

There is extensive video and text material available online for people interested in RPL and the course is free of charge for the participants.

Further detail can be found at: http://www.enop.ee/tpi/eneseanalyys/eneseanalyys.php

Larger universities also offer self-analysis training to students to make the analysing of previous experiences more understandable and easier.

For the first time, this spring (2010) a large-scale RPL promotion week was launched (19 - 23 April). Several information seminars, training sessions and other events took place. Information about RPL was published in all of the main Estonian newspapers, in addition to banners on most visited websites, articles on forums and through communication channels available to HEIs. As part of this promotion week, short videos about RPL were produced that explain the process.

Information is also available on a Facebook fan page:

3.2 Provision of guidance and support

Guidance is provided by counsellors at the institutions where the applicant wishes to submit the application. Guidance is mainly provided prior to the application to support the applicant in understanding the process of RPL and writing their application. Also, guidance is provided to help the applicant to analyse his/her learning in relation to learning outcomes. Together with the assessment result, an explanation is given to provide the applicant with an understanding of the full process.
Counsellors have had extensive training courses on guidance skills and RPL specifics. The training courses are provided either by the institution where the counsellor works or some are provided by ESF programme coordination offices. For example in Tallinn University all counsellors have participated in introductory validation counselling training (2 days) and twice a year 1-2 day supervision seminars are organised. This training is compulsory for the counsellors in Tallinn University.

Vocational education and qualification framework practitioners also have received training but there are no official requirements for these, nor a structured training system. There is no unified training system for all validation practitioners. Responsibility for training practitioners has been left to the institutions.

### Costs to individuals

Currently, as there is ESF funding to support RPL applications, these are often free for the applicant. A Common framework for the cost of RPL in higher education will be developed in the near future under the ESF project Primus. Current practice for the fee is based on the volume of applications and is linked to credit points. For example, at the Tallinn University of Technology:

- application based on prior studies up to 30 ECTS – 150 EEK (EUR 9.6) per 1 ECTS
- application based on prior studies more than 30 ECTS – 4500 EEK in total (EUR 288)
- application based on prior experiential learning (work experience) up to 30 ECTS – 300 EEK (EUR 19) per 1 ECTS
- application based on prior experiential learning (work experience) more than 30 ECTS – 9000 EEK (EUR 575)

It seems that experiential learning, non-formal and informal learning is considered to be more difficult to assess, hence the charges are higher. Prior studies refers to prior formal education that usually already has ECTS credits, course programmes and learning outcomes thus validation needs to match the existing credit points and course content with the programme targeted by the applicant.

### Initiatives focused on specific target groups

Two new ESF initiatives were launched in 2010 for people who have dropped out of higher education or vocational education. The higher education initiative ‘TULE’ – Resumption of interrupted education in higher education is described in the box below.

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**TULE – Resumption of interrupted education in higher education, Estonia**

This ESF-funded programme was developed for the higher education sector and is targeted at those who dropped out of their studies between 2003 and 2009. The project was initiated in January 2010 and is expected to continue until November 2015.

The programme is coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Research. There are 13 partner institutions (higher education institutions) which receive funding for study places.

The target group is individuals who have not finished their undergraduate or masters degrees. People who have completed at least 50% of their studies are eligible to take part in order to complete their studies.

The programme is free of charge for the participants. The available budget is 75 million EEK (4.8 million EUR).

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There is also an initiative in the vocational education sector. ‘KUTSE’ is intended for learners who did not finish their studies and dropped out between 2003 and 2009. In total 400 students are expected to return to vocational education through the programme (http://www.hm.ee/KUTSE).

3.5 Evidence of benefits to individuals

There is no common data available on the benefits of RPL to individuals. However successful RPL cases have been portrayed, for example, in a TV programme Tagatargemad (http://etv.err.ee/arhiiv.php?id=104212). The greatest emphasis was on saving time and resources in studying but the programme also stressed that prior learning is of value and adult learners can benefit from validation of their prior learning, because they are not required to repeat what they already know. An issue raised was that even education pursued in the Soviet times can still carry some value, in an effort to motivate people to try and to return to university even if their previous studies were undertaken a long time ago.

4 QUALITY ASSURANCE AND EVALUATION

4.1 Quality Assurance Framework

As noted previously, common RPL principles have been agreed with higher education institutions. It is expected that vocational education and professional qualification RPL processes will follow the agreed set of principles.

Common principles include the following:

- RPL should have a purpose;
- RPL should be voluntary for the applicant and originate from applicants needs;
- The RPL process should be reliable;
- Assessors and counsellors must be competent;
- RPL should have quality assurance processes;
- There should be principles for RPL assessment.

A handbook for institutions is currently in preparation, due to be completed in spring 2011. The handbook will provide information on how to implement RPL procedures to ensure that they are in accordance with the framework.

4.2 Quality assurance systems / procedures

Institutions develop their own quality assurance procedures, which need to be coherent with either the higher education standard or the vocational education standard. Several institutions have quality assurance committees, which regularly examine RPL assessments and make recommendations and suggestions.

Tallinn University for example has formed a board of experts in order to assure quality and provide an equal RPL process for all applicants. The board members are: a student representative; an academic counsellor and RPL coordinator; an academic auditor, a RPL
expert (experienced as a researcher, assessor and RPL trainer); and, depending on the assessment, the head of curriculum of the applied programme.

Other quality assurance procedures include, for example:

- Following common validation principles (in higher education);
- Institutions have clearly described validation processes in place where validation practitioners have specific roles (e.g. counsellors, assessors) and it is made sure that counsellors and assessors do not go beyond their defined responsibilities (e.g. counsellor never assesses);
- In some institutions all validation practitioners are required to have undertaken prior training about validation;
- There are also plans to include independent external assessors to further improve the quality assurance of RPL in institutions of higher education.

4.3 Evaluation framework

Evaluations are carried out separately in institutions and a national/sector evaluation system does not exist. For example, Tallinn University carried out focus group interviews with counsellors in order to know better the existing problems and find ways to support practitioners and applicants. An electronic evaluation system is in place for the applicants. Feedback is requested on the RPL process in general and each specific aspect is specified. Several other institutions also have evaluated RPL applicant’s feedback as well as counsellors’ and assessors’ feedback within the institution, for example Tallinn University of Technology, the Estonian University of Life Sciences and Tartu Health Care College.

5 ASSESSMENT METHODS

5.1 Methods used

The most common methods for assessment are application forms where applicants describe their prior learning and submit additional documents to support the application. A common basis for application forms was developed in 2009 by a work group within the Primus project and this application form (with changes in appearance made by individual institutions) is being used by all main higher education institutions in Estonia. The basic application form can be found at [http://primus.archimedes.ee/node/15](http://primus.archimedes.ee/node/15). At Tallinn University of Technology it is also possible to submit the application form electronically through the Study Information System (Academic Database).

Individual examples of application forms are:

- Tallinn University of Technology - [http://www.ttu.ee/vota/taotlusvormid/](http://www.ttu.ee/vota/taotlusvormid/)
- Tallinn University - [http://www.tlu.ee/?LangID=1&CatID=3880&ArtID=7834&action=article](http://www.tlu.ee/?LangID=1&CatID=3880&ArtID=7834&action=article)

Assessment committees are often used, with the committees consisting of specialists in given field and head of curriculum.

Analysis of the applicant’s studies in accordance with the learning outcomes of the course or module applied for is also included in the application form. Documents added to the application form might include different certificates, diplomas, examples of work carried out, publications, recommendation letters, job descriptions etc. Application forms, together with all the supporting documentation, (e.g. documents, self analysis) are sometimes considered as a portfolio. In some cases, after submitting an application form, an interview may follow with the assessment based on the documents provided. Besides interviews, extra
assignments are sometimes given to applicants to prove that they have acquired the necessary learning outcomes. Case studies or other written assignments may be used. In the case of professional qualification standards, application forms, portfolios, observation and interviews are used. For example, in the case of the adult educator's professional qualification standard, observation is sometimes used.

5.2 Advantages and disadvantages of the methods used

Assessment is mostly made only based on the application and the applicant is not met in person. People who are less skilled with written communication may therefore be in a disadvantaged position. The use of additional assignments and interviews has been growing as assessors gain more confidence and experience.

6 VALIDATION PRACTITIONERS

6.1 Profile of validation practitioners

RPL practitioners in higher education usually are as follows:

- Assessors – head of curriculum or leading professor or lecturer;
- Counsellors – study coordinators, administrators, or academic counsellors.

A validation committee or council might be formed for assessing more difficult cases or experiential learning applications. For example in Tallinn University a validation council assesses non-formal and informal learning applications. Prior formal studies are assessed by the head of the curriculum or if needed consulted with the academic staff teaching the course applied to.

In more practical areas of validation, employers might be involved in the assessment.

Quite often the counsellors also do administrative work related to RPL such as collecting statistics, communicating with the applicant, and entering RPL data into study systems.

In vocational education, validation practitioners are usually heads of departments and vocational teachers who have good knowledge about the curriculum. If needed other experts (e.g. employers) can be involved in assessment.

For qualification standards, the assessors are experts in the field from the awarding body.

6.2 Provision of training and support to practitioners

There are currently many training opportunities due to extensive funding (ESF programme). Training courses are offered to assessors, counsellors and applicants. Courses for assessors and counsellors are recommended in order to serve as RPL practitioners.

Courses for applicants are voluntary and in place to help applicants in the process of RPL and to support their self-analysis. Tallinn University of Technology has an e-course for the applicants. Another e-course has been developed by Archimedes Foundation that gives a basic overview of RPL, its goals and procedures, openly available on a Moodle platform.

There is a network of RPL trainers (i.e. those who provide training to RPL practitioners, who in general are RPL practitioners themselves) in Estonia, which organises training sessions and meetings for the trainers. For example the assessors training course has the following learning outcomes:

- Understanding the nature and principles of validation;
- Linking experiential learning theory and the basic features of the validation;
• Understand validation process (actors, the sequence of activities, responsibilities, etc.);
• Know how to describe and analyse their own previous learning;
• Comprehensive understanding of outcomes-based assessment and principles;
• Knowledge about the key evaluation methods and criteria for validation;
• Ability to assess applications and provide constructive feedback.

The network of RPL experts, which consists of representatives of all institutions participating in the Primus programme and other specialists from different fields and educational levels also works as a forum for exchanging best practices, ideas and support.

6.3 **Qualifications requirements**

Some institutions may have developed special requirements but there is no unified system. Common principles for RPL state the need for qualified and competent RPL practitioners but the responsibility lies with the institution.
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Stakeholders consulted:
ESF programme Primus, RPL coordinator
Tallinn University RPL coordinator