



European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014

Country report Estonia

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1 Introduction

Validation practices in Estonia are well developed in the formal education sector. Higher education (HE) has been leading developments in relation to validation, though other sectors - such as the vocational education and training (VET) sector - have been following the path.

Thus the challenge in Estonia is for other sectors to follow suit in terms of their developments in Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and to create a unified system. The current model is fragmented and for potential applicants it could be difficult to find his/her way around the various systems that are sector specific.

2 National perspective on validation

In Estonia, validation is understood as a process that helps a competent authority assess the competence of an applicant based on specific criteria. This includes the extent to which an applicant's knowledge, skills and attitudes conform to the enrolment criteria of an educational institution, the learning outcomes of the curriculum, or its part(s), or the competency requirements of a professional standard. If the applicant's competences meet the requirements, they will be taken into account with respect to the enrolment criteria, completion of the curriculum, or in terms of awarding a professional qualification.

The purpose of validation is:

- to value the competence of a person and provide equal opportunities for assessing and acknowledging it, regardless of the time, place and manner the knowledge and skills were acquired;
- to support lifelong learning and mobility between the education system and the labour market and within these; and,
- to improve access to education for people, including people who are socially disadvantaged, to broaden their opportunities to acquire an education and compete in the labour market and therefore support a more efficient use of the resources of both the individual and society.

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 validation principles are generally also used in the system for awarding professional qualifications. In the field of general education, to date, a validation system has not been initiated. Institutions providing non-formal education have been partially involved in the implementation of validation principles.

As indicated above, validation has an important role to play in enhancing 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.

As reported in the 2010 update, RPL can be used 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 master's 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; and,
- Achieving a professional qualification.
- Since 2013, admission to VET studies is possible via validation.

2.1 National legal framework, system or policy on validation

The legal framework for validation is sector specific and more advanced in the HE sector. There is no overall policy to cover validation in all sectors and each sector is responsible for its own development and implementation.

Implementing validation in higher education

General legislation for HE in Estonia is laid down in the following legal acts: Universities Act, Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act, Private Schools Act, and Standard of Higher Education.

The framework document, the Standard of Higher Education (2008), specifies the requirements for HE programmes and quality assurance. It is a fundamental legal act concerning licensing and accreditation of study programmes or higher education institutions (HEI).

The Standard of Higher Education stipulates the aims and general principles for validation in very broad terms. According to Subsection 12 (3) of the Standard of Higher Education, validation can be implemented:

1. for compliance with the conditions for admission established by the educational institution;
2. for transfer of previously acquired credit points upon completion of a curriculum; and,
3. for calculation of prior studies and professional experience as credit points.

An exception is the final thesis of the first and second level of HE, in which case validation is not allowed.

The Government regulation "Statutes and forms of diploma and diploma supplement"¹ stipulates that validation shall be reflected in the Diploma Supplement. The subjects and modules that have been completed using validation shall be indicated and marked in line with how the prior learning (formal, non-formal or informal) has taken place. The indication "recognised on the basis of prior learning" shall be added to the subject/module in the diploma supplement.

There has been a programme for validation development since 2003 (under the LÜKKA project² framework) and 2008 (as part of the Primus programme³), both supported by European Social Fund (ESF). As a result, a network of validation professionals of various specialisms has been created, gathering statistics on validation and developing the guideline materials for applicants, assessors and consultants.

In terms of the legislative framework in HE, as reported in the 2010 update, the 2003 *University Act* allowed up to 50 % of HE programmes to be obtained through RPL. From September 2007 there has been no limitation but it is stated that HEIs 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 for the thesis or final examination (which have to be defended and sat, respectively, at the corresponding university).

As also reported in the 2010 update, validation can also be used for access to HE - 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 2008, the rules and purposes of RPL have been set out in major principles by the Standard of Higher Education.

¹ (<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/13169943?leiaKehtiv>)

² (http://www.ut.ee/lykka/set_lang_id=2)

³ (<http://primus.archimedes.ee/>)

The Standard of Higher Education also sets a very broad framework for common validation implementation regulations and states that all HEIs need to have validation regulations within the institution. Validation regulations were the first step towards formalising the process of validation within universities, as validation might have been used beforehand without formal requirements. The process therefore varied greatly in different universities as well as within one institution.

Implementing validation in vocational education

Validation in vocational education is legally governed by the VET Institutions Act (2013) and *Vocational Education Standard* (2013). Validation terms and procedures are set out in a school's rules for organisation of studies. Prior learning may be taken into account:

1. in fulfilling the school's terms of admission;
2. in completing the curriculum except the final examination by considering prior learning as a final grade of a subject, topic or module; or,
3. in recognising a previously passed vocational examination as passing a final examination.

A VET institution is obligated to inform its students of the validation terms, conditions and procedures. This includes providing information in relation to deadlines and costs that are related to assessment, as well as validation of the possibilities of contesting the results. VET institutions are also obliged to ensure all applicants have access to the necessary information and access to counselling if required.

Validation is certified by a graduation certificate, diploma or some other certifying document. Experiential learning, hobby activities or any other everyday activity shall be certified by reference to the work accomplished and its presentation, an occupational qualification certificate, contract of employment, copy of an assignment or any other documental proof. A description of the vocational experience and self-analysis is added to the application.

If necessary, a school has the right to give an applicant some practical tasks, to interview the individual or evaluate his or her skills in some alternative way in order to evaluate prior learning.

Vocational Education Standard (2013) is a framework document for vocational education that sets out general principles for validation. The document 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 document, vocational education institutions have to assure the quality of validation process by providing information for the applicant and quality assuring the assessment.

Implementing validation in awarding of professional qualifications

The implementation of validation in awarding of professional qualifications is not fully regulated at the legislative level in Estonia. Institutions awarding professional qualifications can specify operations related to validation in procedures for awarding professional qualifications.

In the process of awarding an occupational qualification, the assessment committee (established by an occupational qualification committee) assesses the competence of an applicant regarding the requirements of the occupational qualification standards, based on the criteria set out in the rules and procedures for awarding the qualification. The occupational competence of a person is assessed and recognised based on learning obtained from formal, non-formal or informal learning. Validation provides the applicant with an opportunity to apply for the occupational qualification, using appropriate methods and evidence in order to avoid assessment and validation of the competences that have been assessed and validated earlier.

The Occupational Qualifications Act

As reported in the 2010 update, the Occupational Qualifications Act, which serves as the basis for significant changes in the Estonian system of professional qualifications, took effect

on 1 September 2008. An eight-level qualification framework was established in 2008, with the Occupational Qualifications Act. Estonia has a comprehensive qualifications framework, which consists of four sub-frameworks: for general education, for vocational education and training (VET), for HE and for occupational qualifications with sub-framework specific level descriptors. Referencing of the Estonian qualification framework to the EQF took place from 2008 to 2011. The creation and implementation of the NQF is based on the principles for accountability and quality assurance of qualifications laid down by the European Parliament and Council recommendation on the establishment of the EQF.

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).

Validation in general education

Validation in general education is still in its early stages of development and there is no established practice yet. It is important to train teachers for making decisions that ensure the quality of validation.

2.2 Skills audits

Skills audit, as described in the European Recommendation on Validation, is not available in Estonia.

The Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund organises labour market services that help unemployed people find new employment. As part of these activities, the fund provides career counselling services and labour market training. The provision of career counselling also entails advice and guidance in relation to further education opportunities; career choices; training or work corresponding to the user's personal characteristics; as well as, education and skills for people who are unemployed or who have received notice of termination of their employment or service relationship. The aim of career counselling is to advise individuals on matters relating to the choice of employment or profession and access to employment and career formation. The aim of labour market training is to help the unemployed find work through learning or developing the required skills and knowledge.

To support individuals in their effort to secure employment, Individual Action Plans are drawn up by the Unemployment Fund. The individual situation is assessed and a job mediation consultant compiles the action plan for the person. The objective of the Individual Action Plan is to enable the individual to consider and plan the activities required to find and secure employment. The plan also includes a description of the professional and working skills of the unemployed person and of their broader skills which could facilitate employment.

No clear links are made to validation practices.

2.3 Relationship with qualifications framework and credit systems, and information on standards used for validation

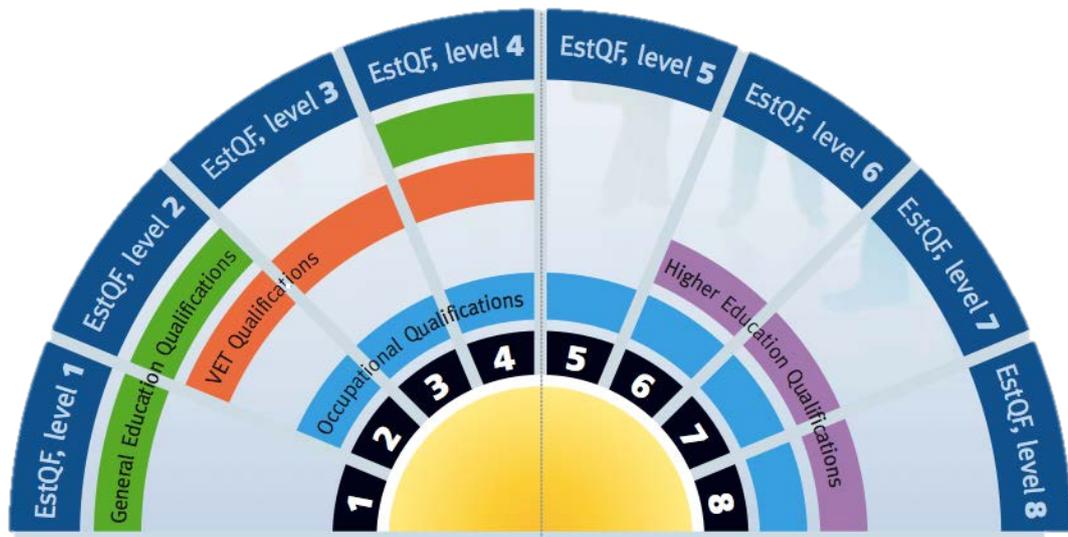
Qualifications and qualifications frameworks

An eight-level qualification framework was established in 2008, with the Occupational Qualifications Act⁴. Estonia has a comprehensive qualifications framework, which consists of four sub-frameworks: for general education; for vocational education and training; for HE; and, for occupational qualifications with sub-framework specific level descriptors.

As illustrated in Figure 2.1, referencing of the Estonian qualification framework to the EQF took place from December 2008 to August 2011. The creation and implementation of the Estonian qualification framework is based on the principles for accountability and quality assurance of qualifications laid down by the European Parliament and Council recommendation on the establishment of the EQF. Occupational qualifications can be gained through formal education as well as through non-formal and informal learning.

⁴ (<http://www.kutsekoda.ee/en/kutsesysteem/oigusaktidkutseseadus>).

Figure 2.1 Estonian Qualifications Framework



The implementation of validation is explained in further detail in chapter 2.1.

Credit systems

In the HE system, a credit point system, which conforms to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), is used. In VET, a credit point system based on ECVET is in development. The new Vocational Educational Institutions Act was adopted in June 2013. It will serve as a basis for several important improvements, including: all vocational education curricula will be outcome-based; curricula and qualifications will be brought in line with the Estonian qualification framework; and, curricula groups will be accredited by employers and entrepreneurs. As a result, vocational education should become even more practical, efficient and consistent with labour market requirements.

As reported in the 2010 update, since 1 September 2009, the 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 HE 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 HE, ECTS credits are awarded as a result of validation. The amount of credits awarded depend 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. However, ECVET credits are awarded through several pilot projects, such as EstVET, which began in 2014 and follows ECVET principles.

Standards

The same standards are used in validation, such as occupational standards and educational standards.

2.4 National institutional framework

As was the case in 2010, there is no national institution with responsibility for validation. Developments in HE were led by the Archimedes Foundation, which is an independent body established by the Estonian government with the objective to coordinate and implement different international and national programmes and projects in the field of training, education

and research. Archimedes was responsible for implementing the ESF-funded project 'Primus' and its office was the main coordinating body in the development of RPL.

Validation in qualification standards is coordinated by the Estonian Qualifications Authority and, in vocational education, the developments are led by Foundation INNOVE. The main objective of the Foundation INNOVE is to coordinate the lifelong learning development activities and to implement the relevant programmes and projects and the EU structural aid in a targeted and efficient manner.

In line with legislative requirements⁵, all higher education, and vocational education institutions have a set of regulations for recognition of prior learning in place.

In the spring of 2013, the Estonian RPL Association (ERPLA) was founded and established as an NGO. The aims of the association are: to support the professionalisation of RPL practitioners; to support the implementation and quality assurance of RPL principles; to support cooperation in RPL in all sectors; and, to create a unified RPL system.

ERPLA is an initiative based on a bottom-up approach with a focus on uniting various RPL practitioners in the field, as well as other interested parties. For the upcoming year (2014), the work plan for ERPLA foresees close cooperation with social partners (including HE; VET and the qualification authority); training and consultancy on RPL; and, possible cooperation with the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund, in relation to skills audits and development of counselling services.

2.5 Governance and allocation of responsibilities

2.5.1 Please describe the allocation of responsibilities (at national, regional, local, social partner, provider level) according to the different aspects of validation

As noted above, the HE sector has been leading RPL developments.

RPL is not a separate or independent activity, but is inseparably linked to the study process and awarding of professional qualifications. In order to implement the RPL systematically and within the requirements of current legislation, it is necessary to organise RPL in (educational) institutions methodically and in a manner that is clear and understandable for all parties –including the applicant, assessors, advisers and employers.

As reported in the 2010 update, educational providers carry responsibility for RPL regulations and procedures within relevant institutions. Institutions must have RPL processes in place, while providing guidance for learners, undertaking assessments, assuring the quality of the process and providing information.

The system of RPL consists of

- the regulatory and organisational framework (including legislation and guides, documentation, workflow, data and information management, counselling and training services, etc.); and,
- the process itself, consisting of the phases of advising, application, assessment, recognition and feedback.

The Standard of Higher Education and the Standard of Vocational Education, discussed above, oblige educational institutions to:

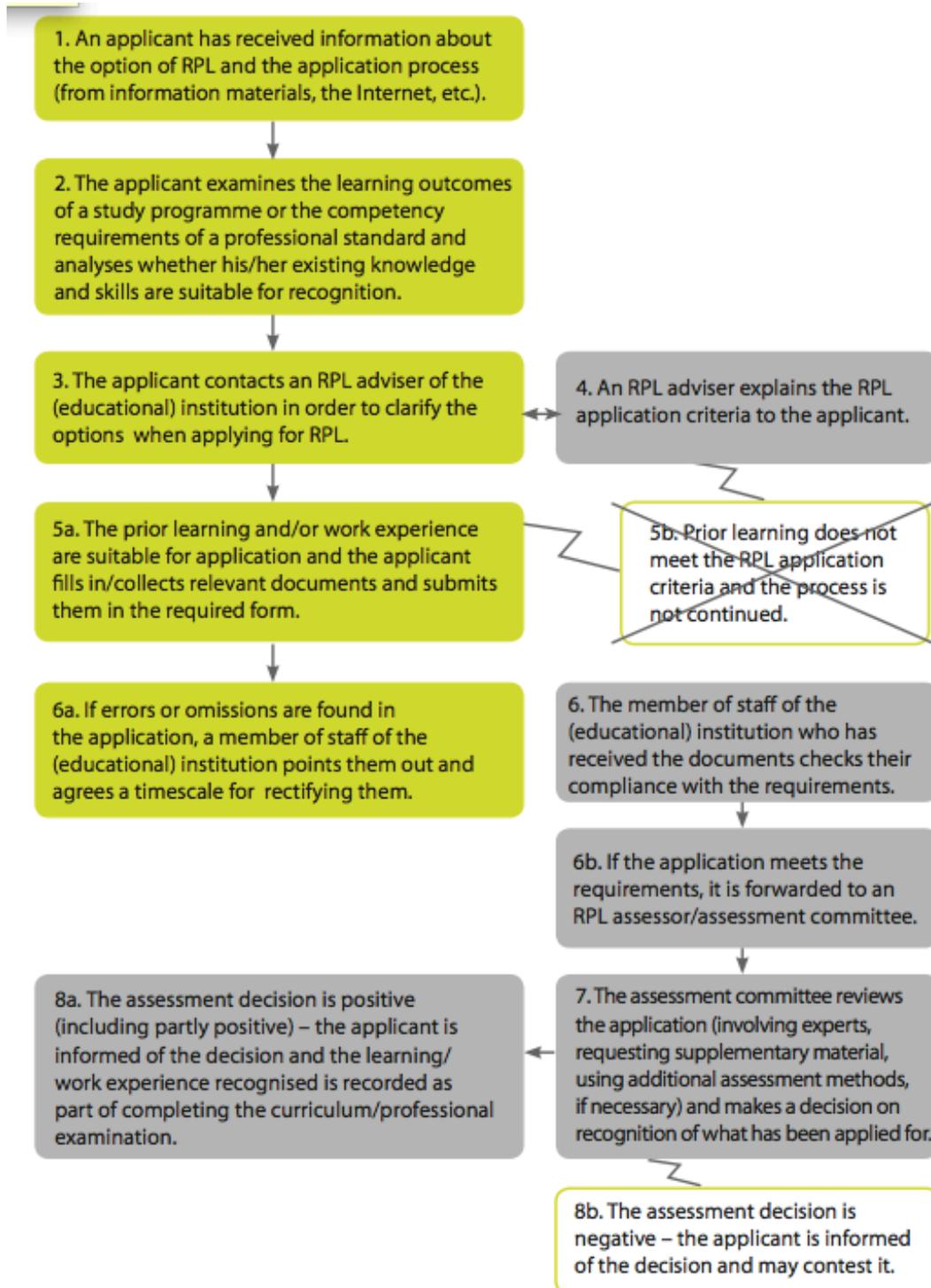
- inform students of the conditions and procedures for RPL (including the terms and costs relating to the assessment that will be borne by the student) and the options for contesting the results;
- ensure availability of the necessary information, instruction and consulting services for RPL applicants;
- ensure the uniformity of the procedure or RPL, and the competence and impartiality with regard to the result of the persons who conduct assessment; and,

⁵ VET Institutions Act 2013; Vocational education standard 2013; University Act 2008, Standard of Higher Education 2008

- establish opportunities for RPL assessors to participate in in-service training and co-operation networks (Section 12 of the Standard of Higher Education and Section 82 of the Standard of Vocational Education).

The RPL process flow diagram provided in Figure 2.2 illustrates the role of different partners in validation.

Figure 2.2 The RPL Process



Pursuant to the Occupational Qualifications Act (2008), institutions awarding occupational qualifications (IAOQ) are legal entities or authorities that have been granted the right to award occupational qualifications based on one or several qualification standards.

To ensure impartiality in awarding occupational qualifications, the IAOQ shall set up an occupational qualifications committee that shall consist of the representatives of

stakeholders in the given field: specialists, employers, employees, trainers, representatives of professional associations and, if necessary, representatives of clients, as well as other interested parties.

The rules for the awarding of occupational qualifications describe general requirements for the awarding process and the procedure for the application and methods for assessing the applicants' competence. General rules are laid down by the awarding body and in a small number of cases RPL is mentioned as well, even though, in practice, RPL is being used – prior learning and competences are being assessed.

2.5.2 Explain more specifically the role of different stakeholders

Education and training providers:

Validation has been led by the HE sector due to extensive funding schemes. As a result, the validation procedures, arrangements for a quality code (the 'principles of RPL', which also constitute the quality criteria for RPL, are described in more detail below) that has been developed for HE is being adopted by other sectors as well.

As indicated above and as reported in the 2010 update, educational providers (in HE and VET) continue to 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.

Private sector actors (including social partners)

The private sector does not have a major role to play in validation practices. Employers are included in assessment of validation in various cases in HE, VET and occupational standards. Employers are part of assessment processes in more technical areas and also in the ICT area. Occupational standards assessment is carried out by an awarding body which usually consists of employers' representatives.

As noted in the 2007 and 2010 European Inventory reports for Estonia, Employers have always appreciated prior formal, non-formal and informal learning upon hiring people, as well as valued work experience and 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.

Third sector organisations

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).

The Estonian Non-formal Adult Education Association (ENEA) is involved in RPL through project work. For example, ENEA organised a seminar for their members in the spring of 2013, to inform non-formal education providers about RPL and to introduce RPL as an opportunity for their learners.

As noted earlier, the Estonian RPL Association was established as an NGO recently.

2.5.3 Coordination between stakeholders

Coordination between stakeholders is limited. The formal education sector is cooperating more compared to other sectors.

2.6 Examples of national regional, local or EU funded initiatives

In terms of European funded initiatives, the following projects are of interest:

Since 2007, main developments in RPL have been achieved through the Primus programme (2008-2013), financed by the European Social Fund (ESF). The goal of RPL developments within the Primus programme is to improve the quality of RPL assessment and counselling, obtain reliable data about the conducted RPL assessments and, to improve awareness of RPL and its potential among various target groups. To achieve that, several activities have been undertaken:

- A network uniting universities, institutions of applied sciences, partners and experts from specific fields has been established that operates as a forum, where all common needs are discussed, and priorities and specific improvements agreed upon.
- Accurate and reliable statistics on RPL assessments and counselling are collected.
- Agreeing upon common RPL principles and quality criteria. The principles were agreed upon in 2011 and they were added as part of the Quality Agreement of Estonian Rector's Conference. A manual was developed to assist institutions on implementing the principles of RPL.⁶
- Developing various e-solutions, including electronic RPL application forms compatible with study information systems.
- Carrying out training sessions and seminars for RPL assessors and advisers, and compiling the necessary guidelines and information materials to improve the assessment and counselling quality.⁷
- Organising the distribution of information about RPL among students, potential applicants and society in general.

For more information on how Primus functions, please see the following link:
http://primus.archimedes.ee/sites/default/files/teavitus/Primus_eng.pdf

BRIDGE BETWEEN VOCATIONAL AND HIGHER EDUCATION - VET-HE

(Validation and recognition of learning outcomes from vocational education to higher education)

The aim of the project was to support validation and recognition of learning outcomes, from vocational education to higher education. The aim of the project is to share best practice models and to establish principles that support the validation and recognition of learning outcomes from vocational education to higher education.

The participating partners will compile a summary with common principles for validation and formulate suggestions for the stakeholders in the participating countries, in order to improve the regulations toward recognition of learning outcomes from VET to HE. The project results will be presented at European, national and international levels. Beneficiaries of the project will be VET students, VET and HE institutions, as well as regional and national companies, businesses, enterprises, employers. In total, there are seven participating countries, these are: Estonia, Lithuania, Germany, Latvia, Finland, Slovenia and Turkey.

<http://vethe.pbworks.com/w/page/32394076/VET-HE>

Promoting the *REcognizability of Learning outcomes from vocAtional educaTion to higher Education* (RELATE), started in October 2013.

The project's objective is to promote the vertical permeability between VET and HE study programmes within the field of health and social care, by supporting the recognition of VET learning outcomes for HE study programmes.

One of the priorities for ECVET development in 2013 is to "support a coherent approach of the interrelated European tools and to address specifically the compatibility and complementarity of ECVET and ECTS". This is necessary to facilitate transitions between different education and training pathways. The project will increase the social dimension of HE, by reducing inequalities and providing adequate student support, counselling and

⁶ For more information, see http://primus.archimedes.ee/sites/default/files/vota/Manual%20for%20RPL_eng.pdf

⁷ Developed guidelines for applicants can be found at http://primus.archimedes.ee/sites/default/files/vota/vota_taotleja_eng.pdf, and, guidelines for assessors at http://primus.archimedes.ee/sites/default/files/vota/vota_hindaja_eng_loplik.pdf

guidance, flexible learning paths and alternative access routes by the recognition of learning outcomes of VET. The project will help to fill in the gap between the provided and the needed qualified staff in the field of health and social care.

The main aims of the project are to transfer existing experiences in recognition of learning outcomes of VET towards HE within the participating countries (Germany, Romania and Estonia), to develop common methodologies and instruments for its implementation, as well as to implement and to test them within the participating institutions.

Recognition of Experiential and Accredited Learning Project (REAL)

The Recognition of Experiential and Accredited Learning Project (REAL) project focuses on enabling adult educators whose skills, knowledge and competence has been gained through practice experience and in-service training rather than through a formal qualification process to have this learning recognised and validated.

The REAL project aims to develop a toolkit which can be used to enable adult educators to benchmark their own experience against their national framework. This method aims to provide greater support for the applicant and to generate a much stronger ethos of RPL than has been the case in the past.⁸

As presented in the 2010 update, the higher education initiative 'TULE' – Resumption of interrupted education in higher education is described in the box below.

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 EEK 75 million (EUR 4.8 million).

Spring 2010 saw the first round of admissions for the students who have previously dropped out of higher education. In total 800 students are expected to return to higher education through this initiative.

Further information can be found at: <http://www.hm.ee/TULE>

2.7 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

2.7.1 Funding

The funding arrangements for validation is similar to what was reported in the 2010 update, where it was noted that most of the funding for RPL development in higher education is through the ESF programme, Primus. The budget for the validation activities (2008-2013) is EUR 1.46 million. Funding covers training courses for assessors, counsellors, applicants, assessment and counselling costs, 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. There is no overall system.

As of 2013, HE is free for students. Some universities charge a fee for RPL applications and some offer RPL for free for their students. Universities are autonomous in this decision.

⁸ More information on the REAL project, can be accessed here, <http://www.realrpl.eu>

Funding for validation in vocational education is similar to higher education, where it is also funded by the ESF programme. Funding is primarily for training validation practitioners and for the promotion of validation.

In summary, validation costs are mostly covered by the applicant and development costs have been ESF programme-based. There is no funding in the state budget for validation.

2.7.2 Distribution of costs

HEI cover the cost of RPL in many cases as RPL is seen as a regular part of the study system. HE is free for students since autumn 2013 thus universities usually do not charge RPL applicants extra (as mentioned above, universities are autonomous in deciding whether to charge a fee).

The cost of RPL counselling and assessment is seen as part of the everyday work and duties of staff and therefore these costs are typically covered by the university. As indicated above, some universities apply a fee for RPL application however, to date, there has not been any analysis on the distribution of cost for RPL in HE.

A similar situation can be observed in the VET sector whereby individuals cover most of the cost for applying for a qualification standard. The fees are different depending on the field and level of the standard. A qualifying body determines the fee.

There are no tax incentives for companies to become involved in validation.

2.7.3 Data on flows of beneficiaries

Data on flows of beneficiaries is available in HE where statistics have been collected since 2009 as part of the Primus programme⁹. Table 2.1 provides data from 2012.

Table 2.1 Data on flows of beneficiaries

	Applications for awarding credit points through RPL in Estonian higher education institutions	Applications						
		Nr of applications	Credit points awarded (ECTS)	Fully accepted		Partially accepted		Not accepted
				Nr of applications	Credit points awarded (ECTS)	Nr of applications	Credit points awarded (ECTS)	Nr of applications
1.	Recognition or prior formal learning	6721	130382	6130	116021	394	11715	227
1.1.	TULE programme applicants	127	17210	124	17113	1	55	2
1.2.	Recognition of prior non-formal learning (including workplace trainings)	911	3791	784	3152	62	322	70
2	TULE programme applicants	1	5	1	5	0	0	0
2.1.	Recognition of informal learning (including working experience)	884	10329	793	9115	26	482	66
3	TULE programme applicants	9	103	8	61	1	39	0
3.1.	Multi-component recognition (combination of formal, nonformal and informal learning)	415	8192	323	6978	23	981	28

⁹ <http://primus.archimedes.ee/en/rpl>

	TULE programme applicants	7	1035	6	948	1	84	0
4	RPL used for admission	233	-	154	-	15	-	24
5	Total	9168	152693	8184	135266	520	13499	415

It is noted that only applications presented to the higher education institutions are taken into account in these statistics. The following information is gathered:

Recognition of prior formal learning: applications that are presented for exemptions from curricula by awarding credit points, for example, recognition of certain subjects or modules that have already been completed or learning outcomes obtained previously in HEI.

Recognition of non-formal learning: applications that are presented for exemptions from curricula by awarding credit points when learning outcomes have been obtained through non-formal learning, such as workplace trainings, etc.

Recognition of informal learning: applications that are presented for exemptions from curricula by awarding credit points when learning outcomes have been obtained through informal learning, such as working or independent learning.

Multi-component recognition (combination of formal, non-formal and /or informal learning): applications that are presented for exemptions from curricula by awarding credit points when learning outcomes have been obtained by a combination of different ways of learning.

RPL used for admission: applications that are presented to use RPL during admission procedures for exemption from certain required prior subjects or modules (for example, exemptions from required prior learning when being admitted to Master level). Automatic recognition in cases of certain vocational programmes being admitted to HEI are not counted in statistics.

TULE programme - Resumption of interrupted education in HE. 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 VET sector has started to collect data in relation to validation (e.g. number of applications) and is currently in a testing phase – a small number of vocational schools are involved.

2.7.4 Evidence of benefits to individuals

There is no clear evidence on the benefits to individuals. Best practice and success stories have been used to promote validation practices but there is no research to support the claim.

The Estonian RPL Association is planning to focus on the evidence of benefits and is in the process of trying to secure funding for the research.

3 Information, advice and guidance

3.1 Awareness-raising and recruitment

Awareness-raising for validation has been carried out in the HE sector through information seminars, the distribution of leaflets, handbooks and the development of a website developed as part of Primus program. A website for validation has been created and can be found here: <http://vota.archimedes.ee>.

Each institution in the HE sector is also responsible for informing current students about validation options. For example, Tallinn University has a website for information: <http://www.tlu.ee/vota>. The website covers information on the validation process, provides information on how to apply and also has information for supporting reflection as an applicant. Various videos and guidance materials have been provided for the applicant.

Awareness of validation practices in the HE sector has been increasing in recent years and potential applicants, as well as academics are well aware of validation opportunities.

Vocational education has developed information materials that are sector-specific.

Qualification awarding bodies share information with potential applicants. The term validation is often not used. Although the work that is being done is a validation process, it is not named that way.

3.2 Role of information, advice and guidance networks/institutions

As reported in the 2010 update, educational providers have responsibility for providing information on their own RPL regulations and procedures. As noted above, 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 practice, advice and guidance is based on the sector and provided by individual institutions. In the absence of a single institution for guidance, generally speaking, information and guidance is fragmented and only covers the institution where the applicant is applying to.

3.3 Measures to enhance the awareness of validation initiatives and practices amongst guidance practitioners

The Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund has a number of guidance practitioners but their work is primarily focused on unemployed people where validation practices are not seen as part of their competence. Thus it is left to individuals to identify validation options suitable for their own needs.

4 Quality assurance and evaluation

4.1 Quality Assurance Framework

As reported in the 2010 update, common RPL principles have been agreed with HEI. The VET sector has also been using these principles. In addition, a manual for RPL was published in 2011¹⁰.

4.2 Quality assurance systems/procedures

The quality of validation is not an isolated phenomenon, but is an integral part of the framework of quality regulations and management of an (educational) institution. The validation principles are also used as the validation quality criteria. Relying on these principles, each (educational) institution assures the quality of validation depending on its specific character, traditions, quality management system, etc.

The principles of RPL (validation) were defined, which also constitute the quality criteria for RPL:

- RPL is goal-oriented.
- RPL is based on the needs of the applicant and is voluntary for the applicant.
- The organisation and methods of RPL are reliable and based on the standards of education, professional standards and good practices. Trust plays a central role and results from social recognition, precisely defined standards and clear information on the process and criteria of assessment.

¹⁰ The manual can be found at the following link:
http://primus.archimedes.ee/sites/default/files/vota/Manual%20for%20RPL_eng.pdf

- The assessors and advisers are competent, independent and impartial. Independence and impartiality are key factors in the assessment process and are based on the responsibility of assessors. The roles of assessors and advisers are clear and separate.
- RPL assessment follows precise and unambiguous assessment principles.
- The quality assurance process of RPL is systematic and based on the principle of continuous improvement.

Responsibility for the quality of RPL rests with the (educational) institution. As a rule, there are a number of different people involved in RPL in any one (educational) institution. This typically includes people who are responsible for the content of RPL (advisers, assessors) and people who are responsible for organisational matters (usually members of the supporting staff).

In terms of the transparency and reliability of RPL, entering information about the RPL in official graduation certificates is of central importance but often overlooked. In principle, all cases where RPL has been implemented must be identifiable in graduation certificates. This helps to avoid aggregation of competences.

4.3 Evaluation framework

As reported in the 2010 update, evaluations are carried out separately in institutions and a national/sector evaluation system does not exist.

Of significant interest in recent years has been the external evaluation of HEI during 2012 and 2013. The aim was to assess the implementation of RPL process in institutions. It was funded by the ESF programme Primus and was carried out twice.

Institutions interested in evaluation signed up for it and initially carried out a self-assessment. Based on the outcomes of the self-assessment, the team of external evaluators visited the institutions and carried out interviews and desk research. The results were collected and presented in a report that was then sent to the institution, assessed. The recommendations made to the institution were not mandatory and the external evaluation was seen as a learning process. The project was supported by the ESF program Primus.

In addition, a check list has been developed for quality assessment in institutions and covers the following issues:

- Is the procedure of RPL in line with the principles of RPL and does it enable assessment of different competences?
- Is the information on RPL unambiguous, including explanations of necessary activities, presumed duration and important deadlines, the obligations and rights of applicants, and the principles, methods and criteria of assessment, and can it be easily found (is it freely available)?
- Are the parties to the RPL process aware of their roles? Have their duties and responsibilities been defined? Are the parties following what has been defined?
- Is assessment based on the evidence submitted by the applicant? Have the general requirements established for the evidence, such as diversity, relevance, authenticity and volume, been defined? Are the assessors following these requirements?
- Are the methods and criteria of assessment adequate and justified? Are the assessors impartial and independent? Is the assessment process reliable and transparent?
- Are the opinions and assessments that decisions are based on being recorded? Is the material the decision is based on archived pursuant to the procedure established in the institution?
- Does a decision (even in case of a fully positive decision) always prompt feedback to the applicant?
- Do the RPL advisers and assessors meet the competency requirements?
- Are the RPL advisers and assessors developing their professional skills?
- Is feedback on the procedure of RPL being collected from different parties on a regular basis? Is the information received analysed and are there any improvement activities planned?
- Are statistics on RPL being collected? Is it based on the objectives of the institution in the field of RPL? Is the achievement of results indicators being monitored and are there any improvement activities planned?

- Is the effectiveness of implemented improvement activities being monitored?

5 Validation methods

5.1 Methods used and the validation process

Methods used in the validation process mainly relate to assessment, as illustrated in the table below.

	Identification	Documentation	Assessment
Debate			
Declarative methods			
Interview			✓
Observation			
Portfolio method			✓
Presentation			
Simulation and evidence extracted from work			
Tests and examinations			✓
Other (e.g. e-learning methods) – please specify			

Assessment follows precise and unambiguous assessment principles:

1. It is not the existence of experience, but what has been learned from it that is being assessed.
2. What is most important in the assessment of prior learning is its compliance with the learning outcomes of the study programme or the competency requirements of the professional standard.
3. The assessment of prior learning is based on the principle of comprehensive assessment.
4. The applicant is not assessed more strictly in RPL than full-time students.
5. Assessment of prior learning mainly uses pass or fail assessment. An exception is the recognition of prior formal education that ended with grading if a comparable assessment system is used as a basis.

Assessment methods are divided into 'verification'- and 'portfolio'-type methods. The first type is more assessor-centred, often including prepared questions, exercises, etc., and being especially suitable for assessing specific skills and a specific knowledge on a subject. Examples of 'verification'-type assessment methods are demonstration (including, a written quiz with open-ended questions, a multiple-choice test, exercises, etc.), simulation (including, solution of a problem, a practical task, etc.) and observation (including, conducting a class). In certain cases, the latter may exceed its common limits and become assessment of the applicable competencies as a whole (including, transferable competencies and attitudes). 'Portfolio'-type assessment methods (e.g. a study portfolio and a practical-training log) are more applicant-centred and include the evidence of applicants' achievements, their analysis of their learning from experience, and other material the applicant links to the competencies acquired.

The most common 'portfolio'-type assessment method used in RPL is a study portfolio containing various evidence compiled by the applicant. This method well-suited for

assessing more complex and interrelated knowledge and skills, which is characteristic to RPL.

Irrespective of the fact whether the portfolio is a sample one or expressing the development of an applicant, from the structural and readability aspects, it is recommended that the applicant should use the method STARR (a competence interview method: *Situation, Task, Action, Result, Reflection*) for compiling the study portfolio and analysing learning from experience.

From the point of view of authenticity and validity, the second more common method applied in RPL is an interview. This is a method that cannot be easily classified as assessor-centred or applicant-centred methods of RPL assessment.

In summary, a portfolio and interviews are the most commonly used methods in all sectors. In more practical areas, observation and demonstration is used. Case studies are also used as reflective assignments.

6 Validation practitioners

6.1 Profile of validation practitioners

In HE, clear profiles of practitioners exist. The VET sector is beginning to show signs of following practice currently underway in the HE sector.

The Estonian Qualification Authority (QA) has developed a competency standard for assessors of competencies. It is targeted at occupational standards awarding bodies who carry out assessments. The standard helps awarding bodies to select assessors and helps assessors to self-analyse their competencies as assessors. Advisors/counsellors are not clearly defined in the process of awarding occupational standards. Counselling is regulated by each awarding body and there are no set requirements.

In the context of higher education, the RPL adviser, above all, acts as a support person in the RPL process. Advisers are traditionally employees of the (educational) institution (e.g. an Academic Affairs Specialist, the Director for Academic Affairs) whose main duties are:

- to explain the rules established by the (educational) institution to applicant, including the requirements set for application and evidence, and to instruct them during the whole RPL process;
- to explain the learning outcomes of the study programme/the competency requirements of the professional standard to applicants and to guide them in the process of describing their knowledge and skills and assessing their compliance; and,
- to advise on how to prepare the application and collect evidence and to check the compliance of the material with the requirements before submission to assessment.

Depending on the specific character of the (educational) institution, the adviser can also be responsible for monitoring the progress of the process, for exchanging information on organisational issues between the applicant and the assessor and, if necessary and possible, for supporting the applicant's self-esteem and continued motivation to learn.

An RPL assessor is usually the person who is also the assessor in ordinary studies or in the process of awarding professional qualifications. This is likely to be a lecturer, a teacher, the head of curriculum, a specialist in the field, a member of the professional qualifications committee.

The main tasks of the assessor are:

- to assess the adequacy and relevance of evidence and to provide relevant feedback to the applicant; and,
- to assess whether the applicant's competences comply with specific learning outcomes/competency requirements and to provide feedback to the applicant.

6.2 Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

There have been many training opportunities in the HE sector due to extensive funding (ESF programme). Training courses are offered to assessors, councilors/advisers 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.

During the period of 2008-2012, 973 people participated in RPL assessor trainings, 242 in RPL counselor trainings, 4,438 people participated in various seminars on issues of RPL, 1,109 applicants participated in self-analysis training courses and 4,843 people participated in various information seminars, open-day courses, one-time events, etc.

As the funding period is due to end at the end of 2013, it is unclear if HEIs will have the resources to continue training RPL practitioners. Several manuals have been created as part of the Primus programme, for self-learning, such as the manual for assessors. These are used by all universities in Estonia. A general e-learning module for applicants was also created¹¹. Tallinn University¹² has also created a manual for RPL advisors and online material for RPL applicants and Tallinn Technical University has developed an e-course for applicants.

6.3 Qualifications requirements

In HE validation practitioners competencies have been described. There are no official requirements but these competencies are expected.

Table 6.1 Advisor

Understands the principles and process of RPL and is familiar with the relevant regulations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Can name the main principles of RPL. ■ Can explain the importance of those principles. ■ Can describe the main components of the process. ■ Can describe the process of RPL in his/her organisation. ■ Can name regulations affecting RPL. ■ Can explain which regulation(s) have most impact on the adviser role.
Is familiar with the main components of an outcome-based curriculum and/or professional standard.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Can describe the structural logic of a curriculum and a professional standard. ■ Can name components of the study programme at the educational level assessed or of the relevant professional standard.
Is familiar with the principles of assessing experience-based learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Can name the principles of assessing experience-based learning. ■ Can name and explain the main methods of assessing experience-based learning. ■ Can relate learning outcomes or competencies with evidence.
Knows and respects the limits of his/her role.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Can explain the nature of the role of an adviser in the context of RPL. ■ Can distinguish the roles of an adviser and an assessor. ■ Stays within the limits of the adviser's role.
Can advise the applicant with respect to carrying out a self-analysis, selecting evidence and preparing an analysis of what has been learned from experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Asks the applicant questions that facilitate self-analysis. ■ Uses active listening techniques. ■ Helps find relevant evidence. ■ Gives feedback to the applicant that supports development. ■ Gives advice to the applicant on finding and filling in the right application form.

¹¹ <http://tartu.archimedes.ee/primus/VOTA/>

¹² <http://www.tlu.ee/vota>

Co-operates with different parties to the RPL process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Communicates with the applicant, the assessor and the supporting personnel involved with the process
Expresses points clearly and specifically, and produces accurate documentation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Presents information in a way that is comprehensible to all parties. ■ Fills in documentation related to consultation according to the regulations of the competent authority.

Table 6.2 Assessor

Understands the principles and process of RPL and is familiar with relevant regulations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Can name the main principles of RPL. Can explain the importance of those principles. Can describe the main components of the process. Can describe the process of RPL in their organisation. ■ Can name regulations concerning RPL. Can explain which regulation(s) are critical to their work.
Is familiar with the main components of an outcome-based curriculum or professional standard.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Can describe the structural logic of a curriculum or a professional standard. Can name components of the study programme at the educational level assessed or of the relevant professional standard.
Knows and follows the principles of RPL assessment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Is independent and impartial in assessment. Applies comprehensive assessment, which includes considering general (transferable) competences. Uses relevant methods of assessment. ■ Compiles assessment criteria that are consistent with learning outcomes or competency requirements. In assessment, relies on suitable evidence and asks for additional evidence, if necessary. Uses threshold criteria in assessment. Gives feedback to the applicant that will support further studies.
Knows the field assessed at least at the level of the compliance to which it is being assessed in the RPL application.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Complies with the qualification requirements of the competent authority where he/she acts as an assessor.
Co-operates with different parties of the RPL process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Communicates with applicants, advisers and, if necessary, with external parties. Co-operates with other assessors in order to reach a joint assessment decision.
Expresses themselves clearly, produces accurate documentation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Presents information in a way that is comprehensible to all parties. Fills in documentation related to assessment according to the regulations of the competent authority.
Can identify and mitigate risks that might affect the quality of assessment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Can specify the risks to the quality of assessment. ■ Can identify those risks in the assessment process. ■ Can mitigate the risks whenever feasible.

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