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Country report

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2016 update to the European inventory
on validation of non-formal and informal learning

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1 Introduction and Evaluation

1.1 Abstract

In Finland, validation which leads to formal recognition and certification is embedded in the formal education and training systems. Validation in CVET (Competence-based Qualifications – CBQs) has the longest history of over twenty years and it is well established and steered by detailed legislation and policies as well as quality assurance mechanisms. However, validation arrangements are in place also in IVET and higher education (both first and second cycle studies) and are developed through national measures, legislation as well as development projects and are steered by legislation.

Typically, the validation arrangements in formal education include the four phases of validation listed in the Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (identification, documentation, assessment and certification), but the processes and methodologies differ between educational sectors. In all sectors the common denominator is the increased co-operation with working life, especially concerning the identification and assessment phases.

Validation in the third sector is not defined by legislation, but its role is related more to identification and documentation of competences. The third sector also has a crucial role in terms of co-operation with the validation organisers (e.g. as work life assessors).

The strengths of the Finnish validation arrangements are in the strong co-operation between all stakeholders. For example, social partners including employers are strongly involved in all aspects from designing the content of qualification requirements to individual validation procedures. Transparency and cooperation promote trust and high market value of the system, i.e. employers see qualifications gained through validation as equally valuable or trustworthy as the qualifications gained through school-based learning.

The education provider decides how guidance is organised, but guidance must be provided based on the needs of the learner. However, it has been pointed out that the guidance procedures embedded in validation arrangements leave room for further development: *‘It is not adequately defined, what the guidance should entail, what the aim of guidance in the validation process should be, what the competences of the guidance providers in validation should be. From time to time, the qualification system appears to be mechanistic and focus on the recognition and certification process instead of individual and professional development.’* (Karttunen, 2015a)

1.2 Main changes since the 2014 update

The Finnish Government launched six key projects (Government Publications. 1/2016) concerning education and training in 2015. Two of the priorities are directly linked with validation, namely the *reform of vocational education and training* and *accelerated transition to working life*.

“The objective is to reform vocational education by creating a competence-based customer-oriented system and to improve efficiency. Additionally, on-the-job learning and individual learning paths will be promoted” (Government Publications. 1/2016). This all puts more emphasis on more effective use of validation at different stages of the learning processes. The VET reform concerns both IVET and the CVET systems.

The key project “Accelerated transition to working life” mainly concerns higher education but it also set objectives regarding secondary education. According to the Action plan “The

*objective is to prolong careers and provide for flexible learning paths to facilitate the transition to advanced studies by young people."*¹

The development of these priorities started in January 2016 and are scheduled to finish by the end of 2018.

Validation systems in Finland are typically developed from a national perspective and are well steered by legislation and policies. However, the model used for developing the system is democratic and co-operative aiming to involve central stakeholders in the development process.

Higher Education

Higher Education in Finland has also adopted validation arrangements and are constantly developing new procedures. There is no data on the numbers of participants. It appears however that the momentum is still strong as there are a plethora of development projects to develop learning outcome-based curricula in HEIs, and other tools such as an electronic registration platform that enables validation at entry phase.²

The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture set up a working group in 2012 to prepare common goals for post experience academic education. The working group proposes the creation of new professional post-experience specialisation education in higher education (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2013). This will replace existing professional specialisation training in polytechnics and also specialisation studies and programmes in universities. The new specialisation education will be governed by clear legislative parameters, thus creating a new type of education alongside degree studies and continuing education. The reform entered into force on 1 January 2015 and is ongoing. Recognition of prior learning (mainly gained in working life) is an essential element of the new educational model³.

Liberal Adult Education (non-formal)

Another new development on a sectoral level is the adaptation of validation within non-formal education. OK Study Centre for example is a nationwide adult education institution. It is maintained by an educational NGO called the Association for Educational Activity (Opintotoiminnan Keskusliitto ry), which acts as an umbrella for its 67 member organisations. OK Study Centre focusses on training associations and NGOs. The Centre has developed an e-learning environment⁴ that guides the trainers of the organisation to construct their training programmes in terms of learning outcomes and makes validation feasible.

The Centre has also introduced the Open Badge –system⁵, the aim of which is to recognize and certify learning through the courses provided by the OK Study Centre. Other liberal adult education providers have been developing Open Badges for learning gained in the informal sector, e.g. in voluntary work.

There are several other Open Badge initiatives running in the third sector, the aim of which is to validate competences gained in areas such as voluntary work, scouting or liberal adult education (just to name a few).

¹ Ibid. P. 36

² Interview

³ For more information see the Report in Finnish and abstract in Swedish and English: <http://www.tunnistaosaaminen.fi/node/27> Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland (2013) *Vanguard expertise. New professional specialisation studies in tertiary education (Asiantuntijuus edellä. Korkeakoulujen uusi erikoistumiskoulutus)*. Available from: <http://www.minedu.fi/export/sites/default/OPM/Julkaisut/2013/liitteet/tr07.pdf?lang=en> [Accessed on 01/11/2013].

⁴ <http://ostu.ok-opintokeskus.fi/>

⁵ <http://ok-opintokeskus.fi/osaamismerkeill%C3%A4-osaaminen-n%C3%A4kyv%C3%A4ksi>

Initial Vocational Education and Training

On 1 August 2015, the existing legislation regarding vocational education and training was amended to steer the IVET system to implement validation more effectively. The most drastic change was the shift from time-bound credit points to competence points. Due to this change, all the IVET providers were obliged to redesign their curricula and teaching arrangements in order to best serve the competence-based approach (Finnish National Board of Education, 2015). This change signals the bigger VET reform, which started in the beginning of 2016 and aims at strengthening validation in the VET sector as a whole.

In IVET, the students have the right to get their prior studies or other acquired competences, which are corresponding to the key objectives of the national qualification requirements, assessed and recognised. The National Qualification Requirements have a legal status. They have been based on a learning outcome approach from the early 1990s, but in school-based IVET (for young people), validation procedures have been developed gradually. Revisions of the qualifications are done on a regular basis to better meet the changing requirements of working life and labour market needs.

The students may include prior competence in the qualification and use it to replace compulsory, elective or free-choice studies. If necessary, the equivalence of the competence must be demonstrated by a vocational skills demonstration, for example. There are no limitations as to how many competence points can be validated, but it depends on the individual's knowledge, skills and competences.

In recent years, validation procedures have been systematically developed in IVET. Many vocational education providers see validation as a possibility to motivate young people with existing competences by recognising them.

Competence Based Qualifications (initial, further and specialist vocational qualifications aimed at individuals with experience, formal VET qualifications)

The Competence Based Qualifications (CBQs) in Finland embed validation of non-formal and informal learning as an integral part of the entire CVET qualifications system. The system has been in place since 1994 and was further strengthened in 2007 and in 2015 by the Decree on Individualisation. The Decree defines principles of validation more precisely than before (see 2.1. for further details). The CBQ system is very popular among the adult population in Finland and there are ca. 100 000 learners involved in the CBQ system yearly. The Qualification Requirements have a legal status and the revisions of the qualifications are done on a regular basis to better meet the changing requirements of working life.

2 National perspective

2.1 Overarching approach to validation

Validation of non-formal and informal learning has relatively long and established roots in Finland and the legislation and policies are well developed and detailed. However, there is no one single law regarding validation of non-formal and informal learning, but laws and regulations for each field of education define validation separately. These fields include general upper secondary education, vocational education and training (including adult VET), and higher education. The core message of the legislation is that validation of non-formal and informal learning is a subjective right of the individual and the competences of an individual should be validated regardless of when and where they have been acquired.

In general, in upper secondary education, in higher education and in initial vocational education validation procedures are constantly being developed and they are becoming more widespread and popular.

There have been some changes in legislation since 2014 regarding validation of non-formal and informal learning. The third Government Proposal to the Parliament for an Act on the National Framework for Qualifications and Other Learning was prepared in 2014 based on a Committee Report National Framework for Qualifications and Other Learning (2009)⁶. The new consultation round will take place during the spring and summer of 2016, after which the Government will submit it to the Parliament. It is expected that the proposal will be enforced on 1 January 2017. However, the proposal is relatively well known and used by practitioners in Finland despite the delays in enforcement.

2.2 Validation in education and training

There is no one single system for validation in Finland but different validation procedures are applied in all the different sectors of education (except primary education). In general upper secondary education the option is little used and there are no guidelines as to how validation should be carried out. The option is stated in the legislation.

In all other sectors (VET and HE) validation arrangements are implemented and typically cover the four stages of validation (identification, documentation, assessment and certification). The VET qualifications are modular and units of qualifications are awarded in increasing numbers. In VET (both IVET and CVET) there are national standards (qualification requirements) and the validation arrangements are well defined in laws, decrees and other policies. The VET sector applies a competence-based approach and the qualification requirements are defined in terms of learning outcomes.

Validation in the VET sector is working well and the numbers of participants are increasing. The statistics cover only the CVET (Competence based qualifications) and there are more than 100 000 individual learners registered in the system, and the number is growing.

Validation arrangements in the higher education sector are relatively young in comparison with the VET sector. However, most of the curricula are described in terms of learning outcomes, the validation methodologies are continuously developing and validation is increasing in popularity as it is relatively well known among the students. New initiatives and projects promoting and developing validation arrangements are carried out in different areas of higher education.

A draft proposal⁷ for a change in legislation regarding VET qualifications and ECVET was proposed by the Government. It was passed to the Parliament in March 2014. The objective

⁶ http://www.oph.fi/download/121526_NQF-muistio_EN_02_10.pdf

⁷ http://www.minedu.fi/export/sites/default/OPM/Koulutus/artikkelit/tutke/liitteet/TUTKE_HEluonnos_27_8_2013.pdf

of the proposal was to clarify the vocational qualifications system, the terminology and validation of prior learning and the use of ECVET. The amendments in the law strengthen the learning outcomes based approach and better matching of qualification requirements to the needs of working life, and flexible/ individual pathways.

The Vocational Education Act (630/1998)⁸ (Laki ammatillisesta peruskoulutuksesta) was amended and enforced on 1 August 2015. The amendment includes a shift from time-based credit points to competence (ECVET) points. The more robust learning outcomes based approach strengthens the provision of validation among the IVET students. The validation of non-formal and informal learning has increased substantially in IVET recently. There are no national statistics available but there have been several projects enhancing the validation in IVET and many systematic developments.

As stated earlier, each field of education has separate laws and regulations regarding validation.

In the General upper secondary education Act (629/1998 §23)⁹ (Lukiolaki) it is stated that the student has a right to have competences assessed and recognised that are relevant to the general upper secondary curriculum of the general upper secondary school. The education provider is responsible for planning and organising the assessment procedures needed to verify competences. This option is not widely used.

The Vocational Adult Education Act (631/1998)¹⁰ (Laki ammatillisesta aikuiskoulutuksesta) has the most detailed descriptions and Decrees regarding validation of non-formal and informal learning. This law refers to the Competence Based Qualifications (CBQs). The law describes the CBQs as 'qualifications independent of the acquisition method of vocational skills or competences'. The Act was strengthened by the Government decree on Individualisation first in 2007 and further in 2015¹¹. The decree defines the validation process in three stages.

The Universities of Applied Sciences Act (932/2014, 37 §) (Ammattikorkeakoululaki) and the Universities Act (558/2009, 44 §) (Yliopistolaki) state that a student may - in accordance with the decision of the higher education institution - have his/her prior studies credited for, when studying for a degree or specialisation studies. In addition, a student may have prior learning demonstrated in some other manner substituted for studies belonging to a degree or specialisation studies syllabus or counted towards a degree or specialisation studies.

In universities, there is no upper limit for the number of credits that can be gained through validation. However, the final thesis cannot be replaced by validation.

2.3 Validation and the labour market

The labour market has a central role in the Finnish validation system especially in VET. More specifically:

- Assessing competence tests (competence-based qualifications): Employee and employer representatives, together with a qualified assessor (usually a vocational teacher), make up the tripartite assessment team. Additionally, self-assessment by the candidate is carried out.
- Assessing skills demonstrations (upper secondary vocational qualifications): In addition to the teacher, a working life representative and the student himself or herself participate in the assessment of the demonstrations.

⁸ <http://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/1998/19980630>

⁹ <http://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/1998/19980629>

¹⁰ <http://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/1998/19980631>

¹¹ http://www.oph.fi/download/47354_Henkiloakohtaistaminen.pdf

- Quality assurance and supervision of competence-based tests: Social partners take part in Qualification Committees (*tutkintotoimikunta*) that are tripartite committees set up by the Finnish National Board of Education to oversee the organisation and supervision of competence-based tests.
- Quality assurance of skills demonstrations: Each education provider appoints a tri-partite body for the purposes of implementing and monitoring skill demonstrations. Vocational skill demonstrations aim to ensure the quality of education and training in co-operation with working life and feedback received from them is used as a basis for developing instruction. National learning outcomes are also evaluated on the basis of the demonstration of skills.
- Planning and development of VET: Social partners take part in the National Education and Training Committees (*koulutustoimikunta*) that operate under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Culture for the planning and development of vocational education (including qualification structure).
- Provision of workplace learning opportunities for VET students (IVET, CVET - CBQs and polytechnics).

2.3.1 Skills audits

The Finnish employment service has a national website that makes provision in three languages: Finnish, Swedish and English. The employment service provides individual support and counselling for job seekers. The objective of vocational guidance and career planning¹² services of employment offices is to assess the capacities, objectives and alternatives related to education, training and employment and help jobseekers to make a career plan that best matches the situation of each individual. Each person's targets are specified and a psychologist will assist job seekers in finding the right solutions. At a job search interview the job seeker, together with the employment counsellor, assess the competences and need for training of the client. A job search plan is carried out as a result of the interview.

Various online services have also been developed to support career planning. They provide access to information about training and employment opportunities and ways of assessing each individual's interests and objectives.

Job search training and *job clubs*¹³ are also provided free of charge for the job seekers. The purpose of job search training is to recognise individual strengths, prepare for job interviews and make job applications.

The employment service also procures training services from various training providers. The majority of the procured formal training consist of CBQs, in which all candidates will have their competences validated. In practice all labour training includes skills audits as the core of the training. The main target groups for these services are unemployed people, people at risk of unemployment and immigrants.

Employment services undertake skills audits especially in the VET sector. This is particularly relevant for special target groups (unemployed people and immigrants), for whom skills audits (mapping and documenting competences) are undertaken in specially designed courses.

2.4 Validation and the third sector

It should be noted that only formal education providers and qualification committees (mainly VET and HE) can give a formal certificate / diploma or award a qualification through validation in the Finnish system. The third sector organisations provide their own certificates,

¹² http://www.mol.fi/mol/en/02_working/01_services/03_vocationalguidance/index.jsp

¹³ http://www.mol.fi/mol/en/02_working/01_services/01_jobseeking/01_support_jobsearch/index.jsp

which are not part of the formal education system. However, the acquired competencies may be the same as in the national qualification requirements.

The role of third sector actors is mainly to inform their target groups about the CBQs and the possibility for validation (e.g. third sector associations for immigrants). Their employee and employer members can also act as co-assessors in the validation process and provide guidance for their customers. However, there is a growing number of NGOs and other third sector actors, who have adopted Open Badges and are systematically developing learning outcomes in co-operation with formal training and other validation providers. There are also initiatives to map different kinds of learning environments, such as workshop activities (see example in the box below), in co-operation with formal validation providers. The aim is to systematically match the competences gained in different kinds of learning environments to existing qualification requirements and to promote access to qualifications or units of qualifications through validation.

Some third sector organisations provide validation services and have developed tools for validation. OK Study Centre¹⁴ is a nationwide adult education institution. It is maintained by an educational NGO called the Association for Educational Activity (Opintotoiminnan Keskusliitto ry), which acts as an umbrella for its 67 member organisations.

OK Study Centre has developed an e-learning platform¹⁵ for its members, which promotes and instructs how to validate the competences of their customers. They have developed a methodology and a learning outcome based certification. The outcomes of the validation can be taken advantage of in formal training as the learning outcomes are made visible.

Many third sector organisations have recently become active in developing Open Badges¹⁶ in order to validate the competences gained in the world of associations, voluntary work, scouting etc. (see example in the box below).

The Finnish Folk High School Association (Kansanopistoyhdistys ry) is in the process of formulating a recommendation to all Finnish folk high schools (87) concerning so-called long courses. The recommendation outlines a learning outcome based certificate in order to facilitate validation of non-formal learning. The Folk High Schools have started developing learning outcome-based curricula. The non-formal liberal AE is very independent in terms of ways of providing courses, but these recommendations aim at promotion/facilitation of validation, quality assurance and unification of certification and methods of curricula development.¹⁷

There is no national data or quality assurance mechanisms in place regarding validation in the non-formal sector. The legislation concerning the third sector does not address validation.

Validation in workshops

The National Workshop Association (Valtakunnallinen työpajayhdistys) is a non-governmental organization that offers training, development and information services in the field of workshop activities and social employment for its member organisations and interest groups. They have ca. 220 member organisations and their activities cover geographically over 90 % of Finland. Validation is one of their core strategic goals. The aim is to analyse the workshop activities and match the competence gained in the workshops systematically with the qualification requirements in co-operation with VET

¹⁴ <http://ok-opintokeskus.fi/en/node/255>

¹⁵ <http://ostu.ok-opintokeskus.fi/etusivu>

¹⁶ <http://osaamismerkki.ok-opintokeskus.fi/etusivu-0>

¹⁷ Interview

centres. NB! Validation decisions are made by formal educational institutions or qualification committees. Further information can be found at: http://www.tpy.fi/site/assets/files/1382/workshop_pedagogy.pdf

The Ministry of Culture and Education has allocated money for projects to develop co-operation between workshops and VET providers. Savo Consortium for Education is currently carrying out a pilot (Ammatillisen koulutuksen ja työpajatoiminnan yhteistyöhanke) with North-Savo workshop actors. The purpose of the pilot is to audit the workshops, map the competences gained in different workshop environments and match them with qualification requirements. This promotes the possibilities for validation of competences gained in workshops

Open Badges

Open Badges¹⁸ is an open standard developed by the Mozilla Foundation to recognise, validate and demonstrate learning that happens anywhere.

Open Badges are digital credentials, created and issued by organisations such as schools, vocational organisations, companies and employers for their students, members, staff, clients or partners.

There are several initiatives which make up active implementation of Open Badges as a means for validation in the third sector. OK Study Centre was one of the pioneers in this field. Its aim was to validate the competences gained in the world of associations (e.g. chairmen). They have also been active in international co-operation in validating the competences of adult educators

<http://osaamismerkki.ok-opintokeskus.fi/etusivu-0>

<https://openbadge.wordpress.com/>

Roihuakatemia has developed Open Badges for scouts. They have developed learning outcome descriptions in co-operation with VET providers and some of the competence clusters are matched to qualification requirements.

<https://roihi2016.fi/roihuakatemia/osaamismerkki>

3 Links to national qualification systems

In the Finnish NQF, Framework for Qualifications and Other Learning (not enforced as of yet), the plan is to have all upper secondary qualifications (general and vocational) placed primarily on level 4, specialist vocational qualifications primarily on level 5 and HE qualifications on levels 6-8 respectively according to the three cycle HE qualification framework.

Practically all formal qualifications (or units of qualifications) that will be included in the Finnish NQF will be able to be acquired through validation, following the existing procedures.

4 Standards

In the Finnish VET system (both IVET and CBQs) there are national qualification requirements that are described in learning outcomes and include skills requirements, assessment targets, criteria and methods. The Finnish National Board of Education is responsible for developing the qualification requirements in close co-operation with

¹⁸ <https://openbadgefactory.com/>

employers, employees and education providers. The standards and the certification are the same for formal education and validation procedures. The market value of the Finnish VET qualifications is high, because working life is closely integrated with the qualification development process as well as with assessment procedures and helping candidates to take up further learning options.

As the qualification requirements are the same for both formal education and validation purposes, the assessment stresses learning outcomes and not the learning process in both cases. In CBQs this has been the practice since 1995 and today skill demonstrations¹⁹ are carried out also in school based IVET system. The learning outcomes based qualification criteria are the corner stone of the quality assurance in the Finnish VET system. There are no separate occupational or educational standards.

In higher education there are no national standards, but the institutions are responsible for curriculum development. Most HEIs have started to develop learning outcomes based curricula, which are helping to make validation procedures easier to follow and more transparent.

5 Organisations and institutions involved in validation arrangements and its coordination

In Finland the Ministry of Culture and Education is responsible for the qualifications structure, i.e. which qualifications are included in the structure and which are for instance obsolete or too marginal and need to be removed. The Ministry is responsible for strategic planning and guidelines in education and research. The Ministry is also in charge of development of legislation regarding validation.

The National Board of Education²⁰ has a more executive role. The NBE decides on the national qualifications requirements of VET qualifications that are developed in co-operation with employers and training providers. The NBE has also provided regulation (1.8.2015) on recognition and validation. The NBE is responsible for providing guidelines on assessment to validation practitioners and it has a strong role in quality assurance in respect of validation. The NBE is also allocating finance to the development of validation in many respects, e.g. innovative projects that aim to improve validation practices and competence development of validation professionals.

The National Education and Training Committees are tripartite advisory bodies appointed by the Ministry of Education and Culture to ensure effective contacts between the VET and HE sectors and the world of work at a national level. Committees participate in development and anticipation regarding future skill needs of vocational education and training as advisory bodies.

Qualification Committees²¹ are responsible for supervising and monitoring the quality of competence tests and for organizing CBQs. The Committees also decides on rectifying an assessment in case of appeals. The Committees receive the proposals for recognition of prior learning from the tri-partite group of assessors. Since 1.8.2016 it is the VET provider that first decides on rectifying an assessment and the Committee decides only if an issue cannot be resolved. In addition, it is the tri-partite group of assessors, which decides on the recognition of prior learning. The Committee members are experts in the given field and they are appointed by the NBE. The members represent employer organisations, employee organisations, training organisations and unions. The Qualification Committees award the

¹⁹ <http://www.ammattiosaaja.fi/en/at-the-vocational-school/vocational-skills-demonstrations>

²⁰ http://www.oph.fi/english/education/adult_education/vocational_adult_education

²¹ http://www.oph.fi/english/mobility/europass/finnish_education_system/vocational_education_and_training

qualification certificates based on the documentation and recommendation provided by the qualification organisers. The Committees are only concerned with the CBQs.

Education and training providers

Vocational adult education and training (CBQs)

The bodies organising CBQs are working side by side with employers. The assessment of the competence tests is carried out in a tripartite manner, i.e. it is mandatory to have employer and employee representatives as well as education representatives in the assessment process of CBQs. The competence tests normally take place in an authentic work environment (e.g. the candidate's job or on-the-job-training location), which requires close cooperation with employers.

The bodies organising CBQs often arrange preparatory training and guidance. In some cases, the CBQ organisers may procure the guidance and preparatory training services from a different organisation.

It is the responsibility of the CBQ providers to train the assessors and tutors in working life. The training usually consists of the qualification requirements, guidance and assessment and assessment criteria.

Guidance in CBQs is an integral part of the process. It is the right of the individual to receive guidance at all stages of the process. Guidance is provided by the CBQ provider.

IVET (School based)

In initial vocational education and training, cooperation with employers is also important. Validation provision between IVET providers vary; some IVET organisations have developed systematic validation procedures and the assessment of informal and non-formal learning are carried out throughout the education process and in co-operation with employers. The practices are more developed in the recognition of formal learning. The students' knowledge and skills are assessed and the students are given feedback on their progress at regular intervals both during and after study period. The students' acceptable performances are graded on the following scale: excellent (3), good (2) and satisfactory (1). The national qualification requirements contain criteria for student assessment.

Assessment in IVET is carried out in co-operation with teachers, on-the-job instructors or workplace instructors. Workplace instructors are appointed by the employer. The purpose of the assessment is to guide, motivate the students, and develop their abilities in self-assessment.²²

VET providers maintain one or more bodies for vocational skills demonstrations and some also have field-specific local advisory councils, which include representatives of the world of work. Close contacts with the local working life constitute the cornerstone for high-quality practical training.

Higher Education

HEIs are autonomous and may independently decide on the validation procedures. With increased emphasis on learning outcomes or rather recognition of prior learning, validation is also becoming more common in higher education institutions.

There is relatively little cooperation on validation procedures with employers or any other stakeholders (mostly intra disciplinary cooperation)²³.

Private sector actors (including social partners)

²² http://www.oph.fi/english/education/vocational_upper_secondary_education_and_training/curriculum

²³ Interview

Private sector actors, including social partners, have an important role in collaboration and development activities in the CBQs system (CVET) and in IVET. In comparison to many other European countries, the involvement of the private sector in the validation of informal and non-formal learning in Finland is significant and also practical. For example, their engagement in the competence-based qualification system stretches from national to local level and from strategic work to being involved in assessments (Nevala, 2011). (See also chapter 2.3 Validation and labour market).

A growing number of companies are also making use of the opportunities provided by the competence-based education system by encouraging their employees to have the learning they have acquired at work and in other parts of life (in formal, informal or non-formal settings) validated. The CBQ system is particularly appealing for them as it is based on the needs of employers. Furthermore, the basic idea behind the system is that adults with previous work (paid or unpaid) and/or study experience should only study those areas of competence that provide them with skills that they do not as yet command. It therefore enables employees to shorten their study time by having their prior experience validated. This reduces costs (time and training) for both the company and its employees (Nevala, 2011).

Third sector organisations

Third sector actors inform their target groups about the CBQs and the possibility for validation (e.g. third sector associations for immigrants). Their employee and employer members can also act as co-assessors in the validation process and provide guidance services for their customers.

Some third sector organisations provide validation services and have been involved in the development of tools for validation, for example, OK Study Centre²⁴.

OK Study Centre has developed an e-learning platform²⁵ for members which promotes validation and which also helps to show how to validate the competences of their customers. They have developed a methodology and learning outcome based certification. It should be noted that the outcomes of the validation can be taken advantage of in formal training because of the way that the learning outcomes are made visible.

Open Badges are increasingly popular among the third sector actors in order to validate competences gained e.g. in work related to volunteering, associations, scouting or adult education. There are several on-going initiatives and projects which implement the use of Open Badges.

6 Information, advice and guidance

6.1 Awareness-raising and recruitment

'The validation of informal and non-formal learning is not advertised in Finland as such. Instead, the public authorities and the social partners are actively involved in raising awareness about the competence-based qualification system in which validation is embedded as a central feature. For example, a dedicated website <http://www.nayttotutkinnot.fi> provides information from the qualification system itself, to good practice examples and assessment methods and offers information on the benefits of acquiring such qualifications' (Nevala, 2011).

'So far the validation of informal and non-formal learning in the field of higher education has focussed more on current students and therefore it has not been actively advertised to prospective students' (Nevala, 2011). HEIs have improved guidance and increased staff

²⁴ <http://ok-opintokeskus.fi/en/node/255>

²⁵ <http://ostu.ok-opintokeskus.fi/etusivu>

competences in the methods related to the validation of formal, informal and non-formal learning. Student guidebooks of most HE institutions refer to validation opportunities.

It is important to note that in Finland the Trade unions and Federations of trade unions are very active in promoting the CBQs. Many of the unions have information about the qualifications on their websites and links to suitable qualifications in the field.

There are also several websites (some of them are interactive) which promote the CBQs system or provide information about how to finance studies and other issues.

Regional employment agencies provide information on CBQs and they also partially finance individuals to take CBQs or units of CBQs in the case of unemployment. Employment agencies collect information on all training opportunities in the region and provide information for their customers.

Educational institutions that are CBQ providers carry out direct marketing to their customers.

OSSI

The project aims to promote employment and workplace skills development for young people with an immigrant background in the Lahti Region. The project will result in a guidance and training model that operates in a network, to which the key players are committed after the end of the project.

The objectives of the project are to:

- 1) Improve access to vocational and higher education for immigrants
- 2) Speed up the study paths for immigrants
- 3) Improve employment of immigrants
- 4) Have an established L2, guidance and financing model based on networks.
- 5) Provide training and work life paths for immigrants who participate in the pilot training and guidance services.

A secondary objective is to increase multicultural competences in the region's companies and other organisations.

<http://www.lamk.fi/projektit/ossi/Sivut/default.aspx>

6.2 Information, advice and guidance

In 2011 the Ministry of Education and Culture published a national strategy for Life Long Guidance (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö. 2011). The strategy discusses improving validation of non-formal and informal learning through improved guidance procedures across the different stakeholders. The strategy gave the task of coordinating regional guidance networks and regional strategies to the Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment. In 2013 there are several regional LLG strategies and guidelines being developed. Validation of non-formal and informal learning has been discussed in some of the regional LLG development plans and strategies. The regional LLG networks are not organised similarly in each region, but generally the networks include members from all levels of education, trade unions as well as educational and employment authorities.

The National Board of Education has published criteria for good guidance in 2014.

The regional employment centres provide advice and guidance on education and validation possibilities. They work in close co-operation with the CBQ providers of the region.

In Finland there are several guidance and counselling service centres for adults, which form a national network and provide information and guidance regarding all adult education, the CBQs and validation in HEIs.

The validation providers are at the core of guidance and counselling. In CBQs it is the legal obligation of the provider to arrange adequate guidance and counselling services to the candidates at each stage of the individualisation process, which is documented for learner's individual study plan. In IVET it is a legal obligation of the provider to include guidance counselling in VET programmes. In programmes leading to upper secondary vocational qualifications, the VET provider co-operates with each student to draw up the student's individual study plan, which also includes identification and recognition of prior learning. In HEIs validation is commonly initiated during the Personal Study Planning Guidance process, since it is acknowledged that guidance is an integral part of validation and is one of the quality assurance factors in the provision of validation.

Guidance in Validation within the Nordic region 2015

The Nordic Network for Adult Learning prepared a report looking at the role of guidance in validation in different Nordic countries. There was a common consensus that the guidance aspect should be strengthened (e.g. training on validation issues, common principles on guidance in validation, financing of guidance in validation etc.). The report gives a good overview on the situation in the Nordic countries and it is hoped that this will contribute to the quality of validation in general.

The main recommendations suggested in the report:

- The Nordic countries should develop a set of common principles or guidelines for guidance in validation related to the different phases of the process in order to increase the quality of guidance services and the VPL process.
- The Nordic countries should examine whether and how Career Management Skills (CMS) can be used as a tool to increase the efficiency and transparency of career guidance in general and specifically linked to VPL practices.
- There needs to be a greater focus on how guidance activities within VPL systems can be financed.
- Education and training should be introduced for those who are to deliver guidance in VPL processes.
- VPL should be a part of the initial education of professionals in education and counselling/ guidance to enhance the increased use of VPL.
- National guidelines on guidance services and policy development in the area of guidance in general can support the identification of ways to organize and coordinate guidance towards increased coherency and impartiality in practices. The individual should always be at the centre of the validation process.

<http://nvl.org/Content/Guidance-in-validation-within-the-Nordic-region>

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

As arrangements for validation in the Finnish education and training are embedded within the system(s), the provision of guidance is similarly integrated. Employers for example are closely engaged with validation (from planning of the system at national level to practical validation procedures), and there is a relatively high degree of awareness of validation among professionals such as HRD experts. The awareness is also apparent in the growing numbers of individuals participating in validation arrangements in Finland.

7 Validation practitioners

7.1 Profile of validation practitioners

In the Finnish CBQs system the validation practitioners are Specialists in CBQs, teachers, guidance staff, employee and employer representatives as well as private practitioners.

All the practitioners should be experienced in their own specific professional field and have a good understanding of the validation process. The assessors *can* undergo an extensive 25 Finnish credits 'Specialist in CBQs' training programme. The training which is provided is based on the *national curriculum* and focussed on *learning outcomes and assessment criteria*. The training is *compulsory* for one of the CBQ assessors taking part in an assessment process. The curriculum was renewed in 2016.

In HEIs and IVET there is no specified profile for practitioners in Finland.

Nordic Competence Profiles of Validation Practitioners and Competence Development (2014-2015)

The Competence Profiles of Validation Practitioners was funded by the Nordplus funds. The project participants were from all the Nordic countries and were representatives of the NVL (Nordic Network for Adult Learning) Validation Expert Network.

'This is a generic Nordic description and overview of competence profiles of practitioners, who work with Validation of Prior Learning (VPL). The aim of this description is to inspire and contribute to a clearer overview of competence development and profiles of VPL practitioners. This can be an inspiration for outlining a picture of the VPL practitioners and for further competence development of VPL practitioners.'

<http://nvl.org/Content/Nordic-competence-profiles-for-validation-staff>

7.2 Qualification requirements

In the Finnish CBQ system at least one of the assessors in the assessment process must be a **Specialist in Competence Based Qualifications**. It is a 25 credit training programme arranged by several Universities of Applied Science in Finland. The work life assessors take part in the same training. The CBQ provider may also organise additional e.g. sectoral training for assessors. For further information, see previous chapter.

Currently in HE and IVET, there are no formal qualification requirements to work in the field of validation. The assessors / guidance counsellors have teacher / counsellor qualifications. Further training for validation activities is provided in HEIs, but it is not a requirement.

7.3 Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

Universities of Applied Sciences provide the Specialist in Competence Based Qualifications training. It is also possible to receive the qualification through a validation process. Specialists have been trained since 1995 and there are over 12 000 trained specialists in Finland. Approximately 800 specialists are trained yearly. As the CBQ system has evolved over the years, further training has also been provided for Specialists who need to have their competences updated.

The main focus of the specialist training is 1) planning of CBQs, 2) organizing CBQs according to an individualized process and 3) quality assurance in CBQs.

The Qualification Committees play an important role as a *support network* for practitioners. They provide a forum for discussion and development of validation procedures and assessment.

For practitioners in IVET (school based) assessment training is provided regularly given that recently the assessment has shifted from assessment of learning to assessment of competences. Seminars are also arranged for practitioners and internal training and workshops are offered by providers. There is a nationwide training programme for work place instructors based on national guidelines. The training includes planning and implementing on-the-job learning and assessing learning and competence during on-the-job learning periods. The curriculum was renewed in 2012. IVET providers are responsible for training the work place instructors and assessors. Further training has also been provided for work place instructors, who need to have their competences updated.

In HE, there has been an extensive nationwide training programme for validation practitioners which was coordinated by the University of Turku and University of Eastern Finland. Hundreds of counsellors and teachers were trained to promote validation practices in HE. Additionally, universities are providing tutor training for validation.

OSTU (2015-16)

There is a training course for validation of non-formal and informal learning of immigrants (10 cr) at the Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences.

Target group: teachers / trainers of immigrants

Content:

- European frame of reference to validation
- Quality in validation
- Assessment
- Life Long Guidance and quality in guidance
- Guidance from the viewpoint of immigrants

<http://www.haaga-helia.fi/fi/koulutus/ammattillinen-opettajakorkeakoulu/opettajien-taydennyskoulutus/maahanmuuttajien-osaamisen>

8 Quality assurance

In Finland there is no specific quality assurance framework concerning validation procedures. As validation is embedded in the formal qualification system, the quality assurance mechanisms that apply to education and training with special emphasis on assessment are also applied to validation procedures.

As the non-formal education providers in Finland have less established and systematic validation systems, there are no established quality assurance systems in place either. In HE validation is assessed through external audits and there are quality assurance guidelines for validation.

On the other hand, the quality assurance mechanisms (Karttunen, 2012) regarding CBQs are well developed and relatively extensive. The corner stone of the quality assurance in CBQs are the national **qualification requirements** that are developed in cooperation with experts from working life and education. These requirements determine the learning outcomes along with assessment criteria.

The Qualification Committees (Opetushallitus, 2012b) have an important role in QA. They monitor and supervise the validation procedures and also support CBQ organisers in their work. The Qualification Committees perform **external audits** on CBQ organisers with the aim of improving and supporting validation procedures and co-operation with employers.

The CBQ providers are obliged to have a **contract** for arranging competence tests. The providers are also required to compile a detailed **plan** to arrange competence tests. The contract and the plan must be approved by the Qualification Committee in charge of the qualification in question. Each qualification requires a separate plan.

In the CBQ system at least one of the assessors needs to be a **certified CBQ assessor**. The assessors undergo a training programme 'Specialist in CBQs', which is 25 Finnish credits. The employer-based assessors participate in the same training. The CBQ provider may also organise additional e.g. sectoral training for assessors.

Legislation, national policies and guidelines regarding validation overall are extensive and detailed. They provide a solid ground for QA.

9 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

9.1 Funding

In Finland validation procedures are practically free for the individual and the validation providers get funding in most cases from the state. Validation procedures are embedded as an integral part of formal training systems, and therefore there is no earmarked funding for validation.

There are various ways of gaining funding for validation depending on the life situation of the individual.

The Education Fund is a fund administered by the social partners of the Finnish labour market. Its purpose is to support employees' vocational studies by granting them financial assistance (**Adult Education Allowance**) and to support the development of the vocational qualification system by granting scholarships for competence-based qualifications (Scholarship for Qualified Employee). The Fund also provides information and advice on benefits and makes proposals for the development of legislation within its field. The maximum allowance period is 19 months if the applicant has a working history of at least eight years²⁶.

The **scholarship for qualified employee** is available for those who have passed the competence tests of CBQs. The scholarship is granted on condition that the person has at least five years of working history in Finland before he/she has passed the tests, irrespective of whether the applicant is unemployed, employed or on study leave.

In the case of unemployment, an individual can study during the period of unemployment (according to an individual agreement with the local employment centre). The unemployed person may use the **unemployment allowances** solely for studying purposes. The maximum allowance period is 24 months.

In **apprenticeship training** the students are in paid employment. The employers get a grant for each student. The apprentices in Finland are mainly adults, unlike in other countries. The qualifications carried out through apprenticeship training are mainly CBQs and individualised²⁷.

The funding system for validation purposes is sustainable as it is linked with formal education and traditionally in Finland education is free.

9.2 Distribution of costs

As validation procedures are embedded in the formal training system, there are no calculations as to what the costs are which are borne by organisations. The funding to organise training is provided mostly by either the state, municipalities or employers, and more rarely by the students themselves. The funding includes validation procedures. There is no earmarked money for validation, but it is an integral part of the entire education system,

²⁶ <http://www.koulutusrahasto.fi/en/theeducationfund/>

²⁷ <http://www.euroapprenticeship.eu/en/finland.html>

especially in CBQs. Validation is not charged in HEIs either, but it is an integral part of the guidance and counselling right after enrolment²⁸.

Validation is carried out free of charge. This applies to students at all levels of education from general to vocational and higher education. However, all participants in the QBC system are eligible paying a handling fee of EUR 58 per qualification whether they study all courses or only take part in competence tests and thereby have their prior learning validated. The EUR 58 fee includes competence tests for *all* parts of the qualification. The fee is seen as a low one as all other costs are paid by the public authorities and this is the only fee for students. Therefore it is not seen as a barrier to learning or validation in Finland (Nevala, 2011).

9.3 Evidence of benefits to individuals

In Koulutuksen Tilastollinen Vuosikirja 2011 (Kumpulainen, 2012), which is a statistical yearbook about education in Finland the benefits of CBQs are discussed. The publication states that:

Among those who had completed an upper secondary vocational qualification as a competence-based qualification, the employment rate was also highest in relative terms among those with a qualification in Social Services, Health and Sports, standing at 89 %. Likewise, the employment rate was lowest among those with a qualification in Technology, Communications and Transport, where about a third of those who had completed a qualification in 2008 were not unemployed at the end of 2009. Several industrial plants discontinued their operations in 2009 and the employment situation was generally poor in the technological sector in particular.

Among holders of further and specialist qualifications, 83 % were employed and 11 % were unemployed, which means that almost everyone was included in the labour force. Only about 6 % were full-time students or involved in other activities, i.e. in military or non-military service, doing domestic work at home, retired or on unemployment pension.'

The statistical yearbook provides clear indication of the high market value of validation in Finland and it shows that even in times of high unemployment, people with qualifications gained in a CBQs system have a better chance of gaining employment than the ones who have completed a qualification on school based curricular programmes.

'Ensuring access to systems that allow validation of informal and non-formal learning is important to making lifelong learning reality for all individuals. Therefore, the main rationale for the development of validation in Finland lies in the fact that validation can make it easier for all individuals (especially those who have no or few formal qualifications) to access formal learning opportunities. Validation can also shorten study times, which can reduce costs for individuals and society. Validation can also motivate more people to take up learning as they can have learning they have gained through work, hobbies or other non-formal means recognised' (Nevala, 2011).

'However, no studies have been carried out to measure the benefits of validation to individuals as such. The clearest evidence of the impact of validation of informal and non-formal learning on individuals can be seen from the learner numbers on the QBC system' (Nevala, 2011):

- The number of adults involved in the CBQ system has grown every year since it was first introduced in 1994.
- The number of individuals obtaining full CBQs without undertaking *any* formal learning has increased; they make up 5-10 % of beneficiaries today.

²⁸ Interview

- Today, all participants in the QBC are exposed to validation as all providers are obliged to consider the prior learning (learning acquired in formal, non-formal and informal environments) of all candidates and design an individual plan that takes such learning into consideration.

9.4 Beneficiaries and users of validation processes

9.4.1 Validation trends

All registered individuals in the CBQ system (including apprenticeships) and the ratio between men and women.

| 2012 | | |
|---------|--------|--------|
| Total | Men | Women |
| 111 246 | 47 653 | 63 593 |
| 2013 | | |
| Total | Men | Women |
| 110 388 | 46 115 | 64 273 |
| 2014 | | |
| Total | Men | Women |
| 119 351 | 49 855 | 69 500 |

The table above shows the numbers of individuals aiming to get a qualification through CBQs has been growing by almost 9 000 individuals between 2013 and 2014. The long-term trend shows a continuous increase in the numbers of participants (since the mid-1990s) with some fluctuation between individual years. This is an indicator that the CBQs are well known and the individuals see them as beneficial.

There is no national data available on the other sectors. However according to interviews and the initiatives taking place in other sectors as well as the governmental priorities, the upward trend appears to be positive in all sectors.

9.4.2 Validation users

The table above also shows that women outnumber men in the CBQ system. The trend is the same in all sectors of post primary education. The representation of different age groups in the CBQs ranges from 15-19 years old to over 60 years old. Majority of the participants are between 20-50 years old.

The CBQ system in Finland is not only focused on people with low qualifications or special target groups, but the entire working age population is targeted with different objectives: even employed individuals may wish to update their old qualification or they may have changed careers and wish to have their competences validated. Some may lack a qualification altogether and wish to gain one. The needs of the individuals are very versatile and the various target groups include long-term unemployed people, immigrants, people at risk of unemployment and people with permanent jobs.

9.4.3 Validation and migrants / refugees and other disadvantaged groups

Validation arrangements in all sectors include special target groups depending on the nature of the qualification and the background of the individual. The Ministry of Culture and Education issued a press release²⁹ in February 2016 stating that: 'A steering group appointed by the Ministry of Education and Culture has explored immediate actions to be

²⁹ http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Tiedotteet/2016/02/Maahanmuutto.html?lang=fi&extra_locale=en

taken in education, culture, sport and youth work to address the asylum and immigration situation.'

The press release continues: 'Immigrants who have completed vocational or higher education studies will be directed without delay to continuing education that fits their individual needs. Pilot projects on higher education institutions responsible for such education will be launched at Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences and the University of Jyväskylä in February 2016. The pilots aim to create a national model to be applied in higher education institutions. The steering group also proposes that preparatory education for vocational training and education leading to qualifications that are intended for immigrants should be increased. A new learning agreement model will be created to provide a flexible way to obtain a vocational qualification or parts of it, or to prepare for working life. In spring 2016, pilot projects will be launched to adapt the learning agreement model to immigrants' needs.'

10 Validation methods

Competence Based Qualifications (CVET)

In the application phase (identification) the applicant is *interviewed* and the qualification options or possible qualification requirements are discussed depending on the needs of the candidate. *Self-assessments* are commonly used³⁰. In Finland there is an e-tool (www.osaan.fi), which comprises of all CBQs and the assessment criteria. The candidate may make a self-assessment to verify if s/he has the required competences to take the competence tests. The candidate is also asked to provide any *evidence* of his/her competences related to the learning outcomes of the qualification in question.

In cases where the candidate has reliable documented evidence of competences (e.g. from non-formal settings) the documentation is delivered to the group of assessors. They may recognize a qualification unit or units of the entire qualification on the basis of the evidence. In cases where there is no documented evidence or one cannot verify competences on the basis of the documentation, *competence tests* will take place (Opetushallitus, 2012).

The competence tests are in most cases carried out in an *authentic work environment*. The VET provider will have drafted an *individual plan* in cooperation with the candidate and employer. The plan will focus on how to make the competence test and how it complies with the qualification criteria. The test situation is *monitored and assessed* by an employer representative, an employee representative and a representative from education (*tripartite assessment*). The assessors record the results on an assessment sheet, in which the learning outcomes and assessment criteria are described. After the competence test the assessors and the candidate review the test situation and give feedback to the candidate. The documented assessment decisions are delivered to the Qualification Committee, which will award the qualification and the certificate (Opetushallitus. 2012a).

IVET

In vocational qualification units, competence is assessed by means of vocational skills demonstrations, which entail performing work assignments relevant to the vocational skill requirements in working life situations. Where necessary, other assessment methods are used to supplement vocational skill demonstrations. Skill demonstrations are designed, implemented and assessed in co-operation with representatives of the world of work within the framework of the national qualification requirements. Students are awarded a separate certificate for completion of skill demonstrations, which forms part of the qualification certificate.

HE

³⁰ Interview

Competence tests are also carried out within HEIs³¹, but they are usually carried out as simulations: for example, in IT studies it is a relatively common practice to arrange IT workshops, where the candidates must perform assigned tasks. However, the Universities of Applied Sciences have adopted competence tests that take place in authentic working environments as well.

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- Finnish Adult Education Association
- National Workshop Association
- Savo Consortium for Education
- Salpaus Further Education



Country report Finland

2016 update to the European inventory on
validation of non-formal and informal learning

The 2012 Council recommendation on validation encourages Member States to put in place national arrangements for validation by 2018. These arrangements will enable individuals to increase the visibility and value of their knowledge, skills and competences acquired outside formal education and training: at work, at home or in voluntary activities.

This country report is one of 36 that, together with a synthesis report and thematic reports, constitute the European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning. The inventory is a regularly updated overview of validation practices and arrangements in all Member States, EFTA countries and Turkey. It is a reference point for information on validation in Europe. It is organised around the principles defined in the 2012 Council Recommendation that were further elaborated in the European guidelines for validation. This is its sixth update (2004, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2014 and 2016).



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