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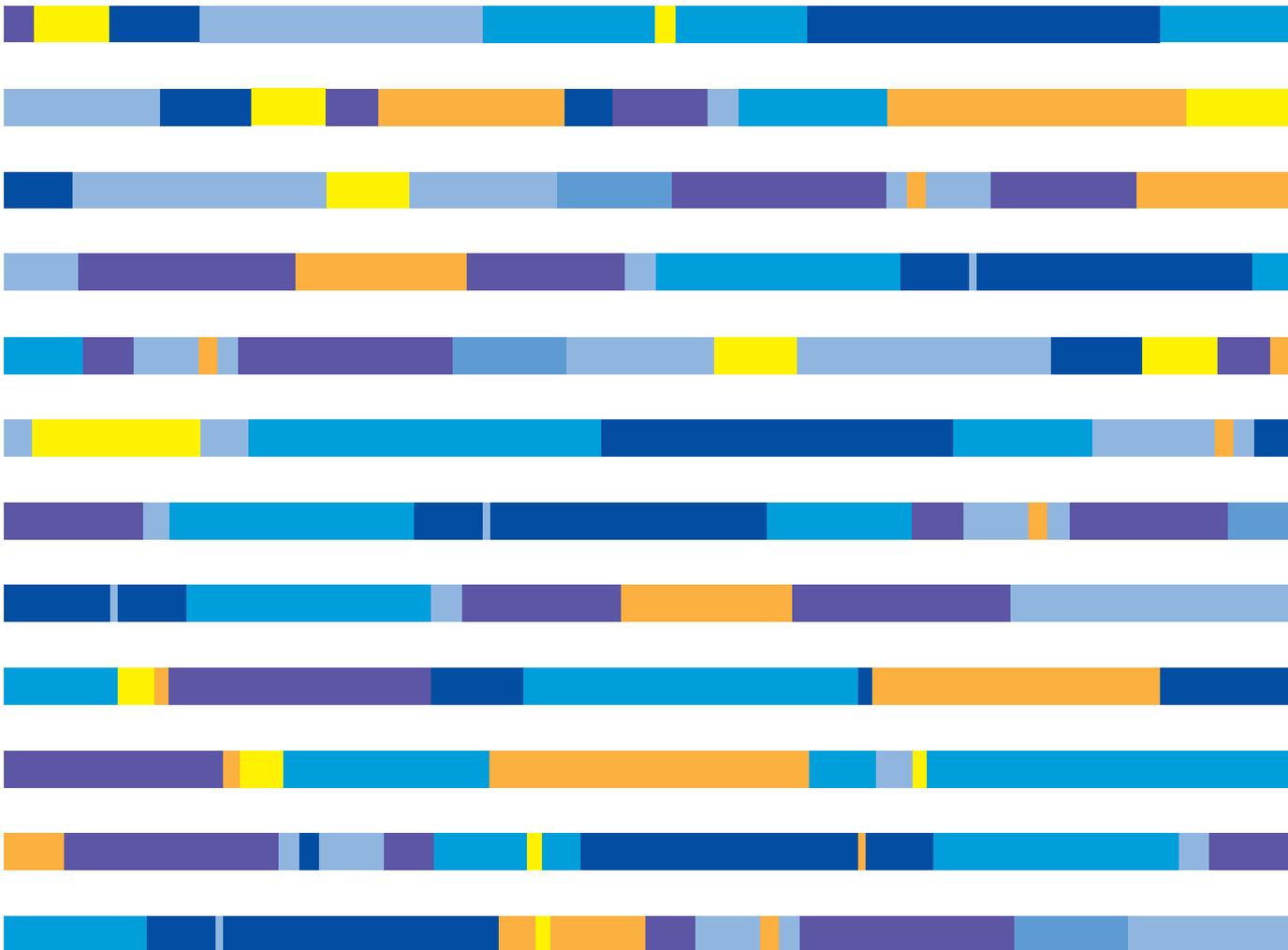
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European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update

COUNTRY REPORT: **ESTONIA**

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1 Introduction

Validation practices and developments in Estonia are sector specific and more advanced in formal education. Higher education (HE) has been leading developments in relation to validation, though other sectors - such as the vocational education and training (VET) and general education sector - have been following these developments. Validation practices in various sectors are similar but links between sectors could be stronger. Thus the challenge in Estonia is 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.

Validation practices are well developed in HE and VET due to previous extensive ESF programme funding. The funding period came to an end in 2013 and since then very little change has taken place in validation practices in the HE or VET sectors. Validation in HE and VET is seen as a regular part of study processes and each institution is responsible for implementing validation including providing information and guidance, assessing and certifying. Due to the fact that funding has come to an end, there are no new common initiatives on validation in the HE or VET sectors and initiatives on validation have been down to each individual institution.

Since the 2016 inventory the main focus of validation developments has been in the adult education section. The Adult Education Programme 2016-2019 (Täiskasvanuhariduse programm) has focused on adult gymnasiums and the development of validation practices for the needs of adult learners. Attention has also been given to validation in the qualification system. Training has been provided to validation practitioners in adult gymnasiums, vocational education and higher education institutions and to occupational standards' providers. As a result of recent developments validation is present in all sectors and in relation to Council Recommendation on validation (2012) it can be said that knowledge, skills and competences which have been acquired through non-formal and informal learning can be validated.

Validation practices follow the elements in arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning as described by the Council Recommendation on Validation (2012). A unifying link between the validation practices in various sectors is a common quality code. Many of the principles and practices for validation have been developed in HE but are being also used in other sectors even though the developments have taken place in different times. Guidance and information is part of validation practice and available for all interested applicants. Project based (ESF) funding has been a feature of the development of validation which has meant that only areas that have been in the focus of the programme periods have been developed and thus there is some fragmentation of validation. Various user groups (including disadvantaged groups) have not gained special attention in validation except recently adult learners have been targeted to help their return to education and validation has been mentioned as a tool. Validation is more prominent in the public sector (HE, VET, general education) and there are few links with the private sector.

2 National perspective

2.1 Overarching approach to 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 an occupational 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 an occupational qualification¹.

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 the way in which the knowledge and skills were acquired;
- to support lifelong learning and mobility between the education system and the labour market and within each of these; and,
- to improve access to education for people, including people who are socially disadvantaged: to broaden 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 learning² (also known as Recognition of Prior Learning, RPL) have been developed and are regulated by higher education and vocational education legislation.

The principles for validation are:

- 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, occupational 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.
- 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.

The validation principles are generally also used in the system for awarding occupational qualifications. In the field of general education validation is allowed by law but validation process and practice has not been clearly defined. Validation processes have been unified at adult gymnasiums as a result of a working group (2016) initiated by the Ministry of Education and Research. All adult gymnasiums have validation procedures described and regulated by institutions' study regulations.

¹ Both terms occupational and professional qualification are used. In the current document we stick to 'occupational qualification'.

² https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/v6ta_p6himotted.pdf

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 2016 update, validation can be used for:

- Admission to higher education and VET institutions with respect to fulfilling entrance requirements. In HE 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 an occupational qualification.

The legal framework for validation is specific to the education level and more advanced in formal education (HE, VET and adult education gymnasiums). There is no overall legislation to cover validation at all educational levels and each is responsible for its own development and implementation.

The lifelong learning strategy known as the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 (https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/estonian_lifelong_strategy.pdf) is providing a focus on adult education and validation. One of the objectives is to create equal opportunities for lifelong learning for everyone including using prior learning experiences at secondary education level. The Adult Education Programme 2016-2019 states that validation principles for general education will be developed and that training is provided for validation counsellors and assessors. Also, overall validation data collection is one of the targeted activities.

Adult Education Programme 2016-2019 (Täiskasvanuhariduse programm 2016-2019) focuses on early school leavers, people who have dropped-out from learning and low qualified adults. Validation is seen as a tool to provide equal opportunities for learners. The Higher Education Programme 2016-2019 (Kõrgharidusprogramm 2016-2019) features validation as a means to achieve a flexible form of study by supporting access to higher education for various groups of learners. Vocational Education Programme 2016-2019 (Kutseharidusprogramm 2016-2019) states that an increase in the number of validation applications is expected and assessment quality has improved. Therefore validation practitioners (assessors and counsellors) will be supported by training and development. The main focus in validation practices in VET is given to learners who are early school leavers or people who have dropped-out of learning who would like to return to studies.

2.2 Validation in education and training

Validation of non-formal and informal learning has been prioritised in adult education. Main attention has been given to adult gymnasiums by supporting development and implementation of validation practices.

Implementing validation in higher education

General legislation supporting 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:

- for complying with the conditions for admission established by the educational institution;
- for the transfer of previously acquired credit points upon completion of a curriculum; and,
- for accrediting 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” (<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/13169943?leiaKehtiv>) 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 project (http://www.ut.ee/lykka/set_lang_id=2) framework) and 2008 (as part of the Primus programme, <http://primus.archimedes.ee/>), both supported by European Social Fund (ESF). As a result, a network of validation professionals of various specialisms was created, gathering statistics on validation and developing the guideline materials for applicants, assessors and consultants. The network remained active until the end of the funding period (2013). A new network for HE validation experts was evoked in spring 2018 and it focuses on validation challenges and developments in higher education.

In terms of the legislative framework in HE from 2007 there has been no limitation on how many credits can be obtained through validation 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 taken, respectively, at the corresponding university).

As also reported in the 2010, 2014 and 2016 update, validation can also be used to access 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 study or work experience in the field of study. If the applicant has studied 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 develop 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.

The Standard of Higher Education also includes a broad framework of 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 each school's rules for the 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 that all applicants have access to the necessary information and access to counselling if required.

Validation is certified by a graduation certificate, diploma or an equivalent 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 whatever way it chooses in order to evaluate prior learning.

Additionally as an exception, students aged 22 and above with unfinished basic education may begin studies of vocational secondary education granted they have skills and knowledge corresponding to basic education. The existence of the required competencies shall be assessed by the school.

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.

Validation in general education

Curricula for lower and upper secondary education is regulated on the state level and are the same for both initial education and adult secondary education which is for adults returning to education. The relevant legislation to use prior learning assessment in secondary education is in place. Evaluating prior knowledge can substantially cut study duration and could therefore be very beneficial for adults with strict time constraints.

The Adult Education Programme 2016-2019 focuses on developing validation practices in adult gymnasiums. In 2016, a working group initiated by the Ministry of Education and Research developed a sample validation regulation that can be used by adult education gymnasiums. As a result, all Estonian adult education gymnasiums have set validation regulations in their institutions making validation processes more clearly defined for potential applicants and for the institutions. Practitioners (validation counsellors, assessors, teachers) undertaking validation procedures in adult education gymnasiums have been supported by training courses (2016-2017 in total 9 trainings) which covered the topics of validation principles, assessment of non-formal and informal learning and assessment methods.

The Adult Education Programme 2016-2019 provided funding for 16 projects submitted by adult education gymnasiums which included activities to support adults return to their studies. Several projects focused on developing validation practices for potential students who have dropped out of education. As a result of developments, validation is used more widely in adult education gymnasiums and more attention is given to validation of non-formal and informal learning. Validation was previously practiced on a case by case basis and it mostly recognised prior formal learning. As a result of using validation to support learners the study process is more flexible and takes into account the needs of each student.

Open educational resources (OER) have not been specifically mentioned in validation regulations in HE or VET thus learning from OER can be validated.

2.3 Validation and the labour market

The implementation of validation in awarding occupational qualifications is not fully regulated by legislation in Estonia. Institutions awarding occupational qualifications can specify operations related to validation in procedures for awarding occupational qualifications.

In the process of awarding an occupational qualification, the assessment committee (established by an occupational qualification committee) assesses the competence of an applicant with respect to the requirements of 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 Professions Act

An eight-level qualification framework was established in 2008 as part of the Professions Act. As reported in the 2010 and 2014 update, the Professions Act, which serves as the basis for significant changes in the Estonian system of occupational qualifications, took effect on 1 September 2008. 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 occupational standards and states the responsibility of the professional body (e.g. procedures for assessing and validating competences).

As noted in the previous European Inventory reports for Estonia, employers have always appreciated prior formal, non-formal and informal learning when hiring people, and have valued work experience, personal characteristics and abilities. The main tool used for the first evaluation of an individual is the review of the candidate's CV, followed by an interview. However, the hiring process is not seen as a process of validation by the employers. Most companies have established 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, attention is paid to official qualifications in some cases; on the other hand, work experience is valued more than a university degree.

2.3.1 Skills audits

Skills audits, as described in the European Recommendation on Validation, are not available in Estonia.

The Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund organises the provision of labour market services that help unemployed people find new employment. This provision includes 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 choice of employment or profession and access to employment and career formation. The aim of labour market training is to help unemployed people 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. Individuals are 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.

Career information and counselling are also provided by career centres in higher education institutions. Higher education institutions are focused on current students, employers and alumni. For students in basic and secondary education, career services of Rajaleidja network are provided. Both services - career information and career counselling - support young people in making decisions about their future.

Career counselling services have no clear links to validation practices. Career counselling is provided for registered unemployed or jobseekers with a lay-off notice and also for people who are employed or not registered as unemployed.

2.4 Validation and the third sector

The third sector has not played an active role in validation initiatives. There is little evidence of validation practices in the youth and volunteering sectors. Young people can describe their knowledge, skills and practical experience acquired through youth work using a designated online tool Stardiplats (<https://www.stardiplats.ee>). There is a growing number of registered users of the portal, which was launched in 2010 by Estonian Youth Work Centre in order to facilitate the recognition of knowledge and skills acquired through youth work. The tool is based on self-assessment and provides young people with an opportunity to generate a CV based on the descriptions.

The third sector is involved mostly in awarding occupational qualification certificates 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 (validation and labour market).

3 Links to national qualification systems

An eight-level qualification framework was established in 2008 (the Professions Act, <http://www.kutsekoda.ee/en/kutsesysteem/oigusaktidkutseseadus>). 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.

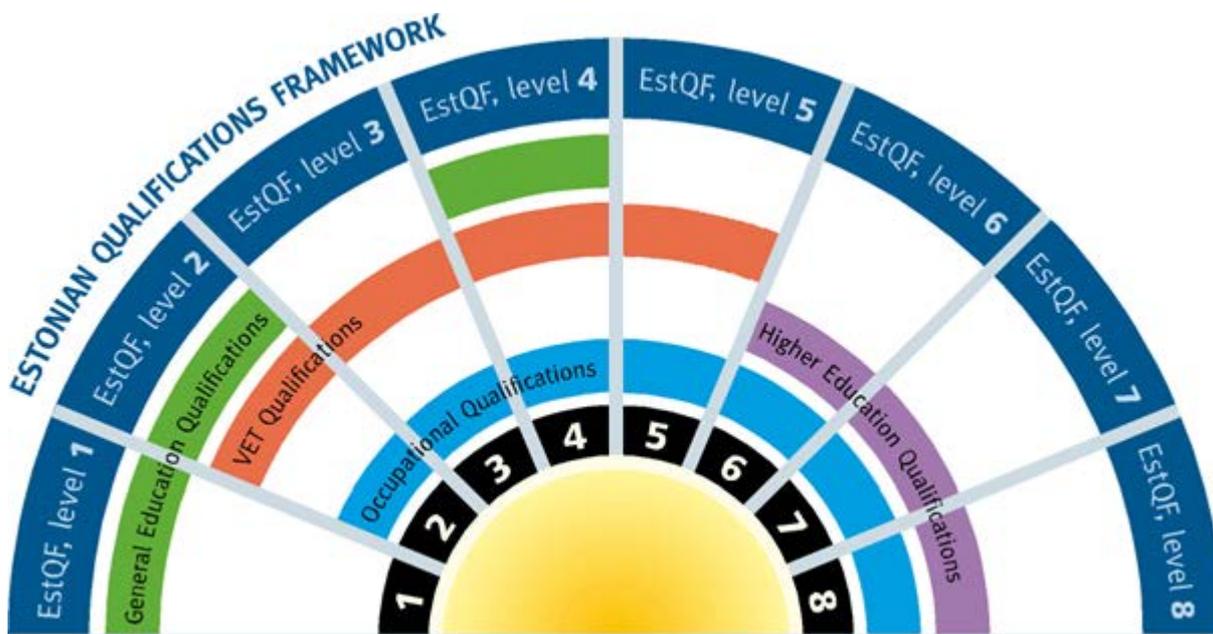
The learning outcomes of each of these have been described in terms of levels:

- the learning outcomes of general education qualifications are described in national curricula for basic schools and upper secondary schools;
- the learning outcomes of vocational education are described in the vocational education standard;
- the learning outcomes of levels of higher education (professional higher education, Bachelor's study, Master's study and Doctoral study) are described in the higher education standard;
- competence requirements for occupational qualifications, i.e. professions, are described in occupational standards.

The detailed descriptions of the levels in respect of the Qualifications framework (<http://www.kutsekoda.ee/fwk/contenthelper/10216434/10444993>) determine general requirements for learning outcomes of the education system and for levels of the occupational qualifications system.

As referred to above, 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.

Figure 3.1 Estonian Qualifications Framework



Validation against occupational standards

Validation of non-formal and informal learning against occupational standards (<https://www.kutsekoda.ee/fwkc/contenthelper/10618872/10633392>) is not regulated by law, but the process is largely based on the principles and ideology of validation (discussed earlier in the report). In the process of validation, the applicant's actual skills and knowledge is assessed, regardless of how they are received. Assessment is following a competence-based approach, where competencies acquired are compared in accordance with standards in the field. In the qualification system, the purpose of the validation is to provide a fair and impartial assessment of the applicant's competencies with the competency requirements specified in the occupational standard.

There are several ways of using validation of non-formal and informal learning against occupational standards:

- Validation of preconditions set in occupational standard which creates opportunity for access to the qualification standard;
- Validation of competencies (full or partial) set at the occupational standard;
- Validation of competencies after a certain number of years when applicant needs to re-apply for the occupational standard.

Validation for the preconditions of the occupational standard is applied in cases where the applicant does not have, for example, the required level of education, the amount of in-service training and/or the prescribed length of work experience.

Validation of competencies fully or partially based on RPL takes into account competencies acquired in formal, non-formal or informal settings. When re-applying for an occupational qualification certificate the applicant does not have to take again

a test or examination and competencies that have previously assessed will not be re-evaluated.

Occupational qualification providers may regulate the validation process either by providing validation regulations or mentioning general guidelines. As there is no common legislative framework, occupational qualification providers decide on how to use validation principles. Validation processes could be more clearly stated and information and guidance could be better organized by occupational qualification providers. Competence based qualification standards and assessment standards are a good prerequisite for using validation. In 2016 and 2017 training courses on validation principles and assessment practices were provided for organisations issuing occupational qualifications.

4 Standards

Both occupational standards and educational standards are used in validation.

The Occupational Qualification Standard (OQS) describes occupational activities and provides the competency requirements for occupational qualifications and their levels.

OQS consists of three parts. Part A of the standard (description of the occupation) provides an overview of the nature of work, major parts of work and tasks, necessary tools, work environment, including the specificities of work and describes the personal characteristics and skills enhancing occupational activities. This information is useful for people who are choosing an occupation or career. This source also helps career advisers, labour market consultants, human resource managers and trainers.

The competence requirements presented in part B of the standard serve as a basis for the training programmes and assessment of the applicant for the occupational qualification. These requirements are presented as descriptions of mandatory and optional competences. Competence is an ability to perform a specific part of work or a task on the basis of having the knowledge, skills and attitudes required.

Part C of the standard contains general information and references to annexes.

Occupational standards are accompanied by assessment standards which specify assessment methods, procedures and assessment criteria. For example, applying for an adult educator's qualification certificate is voluntary and depends on the applicant's wish to formalise his/her professional skills. The application process includes e-portfolio compilation and interview. E-portfolios contain applicants' self-analysis and assessment of competencies and relevant evidence material to support his/her claim. The interview is where the applicant is asked to give proof of his/her competencies.

5 Organisations and institutions involved in validation arrangements and its coordination

Validation as a process is governed by the Ministry of Education and Research, which has the responsibility to set overall policy aims and benchmarks. There is no single institution responsible for validation implementation in all sectors thus the development of validation practices is scattered between government agencies. Validation arrangements are predominantly in the public sector and enterprises are poorly linked to it.

Developments in HE were led by the Archimedes Foundation, which is an independent body established by the Estonian government with the objective of

coordinating and implementing 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. With the funding of the 'Primus' project ending, the responsibilities of the Archimedes Foundation also came to an end. The Ministry of Education and Research has taken up the role as a coordinator.

Validation for obtaining occupational qualifications 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 lifelong learning development activities and to implement relevant programmes and projects and the EU structural aid in a targeted and efficient manner.

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

In line with legislative requirements (VET Institutions Act 2013; Vocational education standard 2013; University Act 2008, Standard of Higher Education 2008), all higher education, and vocational education institutions have put in place a set of regulations for the recognition of prior learning. Institutions must have validation processes in place, provide guidance for learners, undertake assessments, assure the quality of the process and provide information.

Adult gymnasiums have put in place a set of regulations for validation. A working group initiated by the Ministry of Education and Research supported adult gymnasiums in updating their validation regulations and practices.

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

6 Information, advice and guidance

6.1 Awareness-raising

In the education sector, each institution is 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. The Primus ESF programme had a great impact on raising awareness as many information materials were created and distributed. A website for validation was created and is referred to today even though the website has not seen major updates (<http://vota.archimedes.ee>).

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.

In 2017-2018, the Estonian Adult Educators Association has been running a campaign to invite adults back to education. The campaign has been funded by the Ministry of Education and Research and the use of ESF. The social media campaign TERITA (<https://www.facebook.com/jallekooli.ee/>) focused on adults who have dropped out or were early school leavers to promote their return to education. A number of videos and other materials have been produced and circulated through social media. In 2018 the campaign will continue and a website has been launched - <http://www.jallekooli.ee>. Validation has been mentioned as an opportunity to get recognition for previous studies or work experience.

Youth Agency of Foundation Archimedes manages and develops the portal mitteformaalne.ee – <http://mitteformaalne.ee> aimed at promoting non-formal and informal learning of youth, raising awareness of its value and opportunities for recognition, including [Youthpass](#). The portal is widely known among youth workers in Estonia.

6.2 Information, advice and guidance

As reported previously (2010, 2014, 2016 update) educational providers are responsible for providing information on their own validation regulations and procedures. As noted above, a website dedicated to validation that gathers, hosts and links all validation-related information was run by the Primus programme (see <http://vota.archimedes.ee/>). Educational institutions must inform students about the conditions of and procedure for the recognition of prior learning and work experience, including the terms and cost of assessment as well as the conditions of contesting the results, and ensure that all applicants have access to the necessary information, guidance and counselling.

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 to which the applicant is applying. The same applies for occupational qualifications where each awarding body offers information and guidance usually through their website and direct email or phone communication. Some awarding bodies offer seminars and workshops for potential applicants. Information and guidance is generally free of charge.

7 Validation practitioners

7.1 Profile of validation practitioners

In HE, clear profiles of practitioners exist. The VET sector has been following the practice currently implemented in the HE sector.

The Estonian Qualification Authority (QA) has developed an occupational standard for assessors of competencies. It is targeted at occupational certificates' awarding bodies who carry out assessments. The standard gives input into training programmes for assessors, 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 certificates. Counselling is regulated by each awarding body and there are no set requirements.

In the context of higher education, **the validation adviser**, above all, acts as a support person in the validation 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 applicants, 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 occupational 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 for 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.

A validation assessor is usually the person who is also the assessor in non-specialist studies or in the process of awarding occupational qualifications. This is likely to be a lecturer, a teacher, the manager of the study programme, a specialist in the field, or a member of the occupational 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 the specific learning outcomes/competency requirements and to provide feedback to the applicant.

7.2 Qualification requirements

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

Table 7.1 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 occupational standard.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Can describe the structural logic of a curriculum and an occupational standard. ■ Can name components of the study programme at the educational level assessed or of the relevant occupational 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 in respect of 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.
Co-operates with different parties involved with 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 7.2 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 occupational standard.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Can describe the structural logic of a curriculum or an occupational standard. Can name components of the study programme at the educational level assessed or of the relevant occupational 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 him/herself 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.

7.3 Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

In the time period 2016-2018 the Ministry of Education and Research has offered training courses on validation. A number of courses were offered to adult education gymnasiums on validation principles and assessment methods. A set of courses were also offered for occupational standards' providers focusing on their needs regarding validation and higher education institutions. The training was targeted towards validation practitioners such as counsellors, assessors but also teaching staff.

There were many training opportunities in the HE sector due to extensive funding (ESF programme). Training courses were offered to assessors, advisers and applicants. Courses for assessors and counsellors were recommended in order to serve as validation practitioners. Courses for applicants were voluntary and in place to help applicants in the process of validation and to support their self-analysis. As the programme period has ended, it has been up to the institutions to carry out training for validation practitioners. The Ministry of Education and Research has started (2018) offering training in HE and VET institutions as many practitioners in the field are new and have no training in the field of validation.

Tallinn University has been offering workshops for potential validation applicants at the beginning of each semester. A general e-learning module for applicants is also available (<http://tartu.archimedes.ee/primus/VOTA/>). Training for assessors or advisors has been triggered by the needs of new people who have started to work at the university and where one of their tasks is validation related. Tallinn University (<http://tartu.archimedes.ee/primus/VOTA/>) has also created an online manual for validation advisors.

8 Quality assurance

As reported in the 2010, 2014 and 2016 update, common validation principles have been agreed by HEIs. The VET sector has also been using these principles. In addition, a manual for validation was published in 2011³.

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

³ The manual can be found at the following link:
http://primus.archimedes.ee/sites/default/files/vota/Manual%20for%20RPL_eng.pdf

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

In terms of the transparency and reliability of validation, entering information about validation in official graduation certificates is of central importance but it is often overlooked. The latter can result in misleading aggregation.

9 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

9.1 Funding

Validation costs have been mostly covered by the applicant and the development costs have been ESF programme-based in HE and VET sectors. As the ESF programme periods have ended it has left a funding void for validation developments. For example, the ESF programme Primus had a budget for validation activities (2008-2013) of EUR 1.46 million. The funding covered 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.

The Adult Education programme 2016-2019 document states that there is funding for validation developments in general adult education (adult education gymnasiums). Funding is meant for the training of assessors and advisors, generating information materials and developing the validation system. For future years (2016-2019) the budget is roughly EUR 65 000. Higher education and vocational education programmes also state validation as one of their activities, although in the budget it is not so clearly stated which funds are earmarked for the development of validation.

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 for which they are applying, 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 validation applications and some offer validation for free to their students. Universities are autonomous in this decision.

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.

9.2 Distribution of costs

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

The cost of validation 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 validation application however, to date, there has not been any analysis on the distribution of cost for validation 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.

9.3 Evidence of benefits to individuals

There is no up to date data on the benefits of validation.

9.4 Beneficiaries and users of validation processes

9.4.1 Validation trends

There is no up to date detailed information on the number of applications in various sectors. Validation data collection is one of the planned activities for the future in HE and VET. In higher education, there is data on the number of ECTS credit points acquired through validation.

Table 9.1 Number of ECTS credit points acquired by validation in HE and VET.

Year	Number of credits in HE	Number of credits in VET
2014	53 056.3	1 137.9
2015	70 710.7	294
2016	70 710.7	3 169.4
2017	65 585.2	8 477.3

The number of credit points may not show the total number of validation used as some institutions have not provided information.

9.4.2 Validation users

No available data.

9.4.3 Validation and disadvantaged groups

Validation practices are not directly used for supporting disadvantaged groups. Although there is the campaign to encourage adults to return to studying run by Estonian Adult Educators Association which has targeted low qualified adults and/or early school leavers. On the campaign website (www.jallekooli.ee) validation is mentioned as a tool to support learners when accessing education.

10 Validation methods

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 occupational 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 a 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, 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), simulation (including, solution of a problem, a practical task) 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 validation is a study portfolio containing various types of evidence compiled by the applicant. This method is well-suited for assessing more complex and interrelated knowledge and skills, which is characteristic of validation.

Irrespective of 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 validation is an interview. This is a method that cannot be easily classified as assessor-centred or applicant-centred methods of assessment.

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

11 The position of validation in society: visibility and trust

Validation opportunities are clearly visible in the formal education sector (HE, VET, AE) as the institutions offer information about validation to potential learners and students who have already enrolled. Validation has become a normal part of the study process and in many cases, it is not seen as distinctive. Learners are more aware of the opportunities and thus are acquiring information on their own. The term VÕTA (*varasemate õpingute ja töökogemuse arvestamine*) is widely used in Estonia and both practitioners and learners are aware of its broad meaning, even though validation is more associated with the education sector than the labour market. Also, validation is present in national policy strategies (e.g. Lifelong Learning Strategy) and also in legislation.

Validation outcomes and benefits could be more clearly presented as information on these matters is missing. Some data is being collected by the education sector but it does not give an overall picture of the use of validation.

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