

# European Inventory

on validation of informal and  
non-formal learning



# **European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning FINLAND**

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# 1.0 INTRODUCTION

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Finland has had a comprehensive structure to validate informal and non-formal learning in the context of adult education and training since the mid-nineties, when the competence-based qualification system for initial, further and specialist VET was first established. Competence-based qualifications can be awarded regardless of how and where the skills and knowledge have been acquired; recognition of prior learning is at the very core of the system. The system also functions as a framework for vocational education and training, with the national core curricula and the qualification requirements having been drawn up so that their starting point is to describe the goals of the curricula and qualification requirements in terms of learning outcomes.

In addition to the competence-based qualification system, a number of different laws were passed in the nineties that provide individuals with a possibility to access formal studies at different levels - on the basis of their prior experience - even if they do not meet the formal entry criteria. The Computer Driving Licence, which was originally created in Finland and is now established in most parts of Europe, and the National Certificate of Language Proficiency are other prime examples of the ways in which competences and skills acquired outside the formal education system are recognised in Finland.

Similar examples can also be found in the private and third sectors, with ample examples of companies and voluntary sector organisations having been active in this field already for years. For this report we have selected some of the most widely recognised examples.

A legal framework is in place for the validation of informal and non-formal learning in higher education institutions, but traditionally - universities in particular - have placed more emphasis on accreditation of previous studies, rather than learning gained in informal and non-formal settings. However, this sector has seen some of the greatest developments since the publication of the previous Inventory, hence the key developments have been described in this report.

## 2.0 PUBLIC SECTOR

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Recognition of prior learning has become a particularly established feature in the vocational education and training (VET) structure in Finland through the development of the competence-based qualification system. However, the issue of continuing training and recognition of work experience of the adult population was already a topic of the national adult education committee in the seventies<sup>1</sup>. Since then, a variety of different initiatives and legislative frameworks have been designed and implemented by the public authorities, with a varying degree of success.

In this section we aim to illustrate the key public sector provisions that enable individuals to get their prior learning assessed and officially recognised; to provide information on the development and the take-up of these initiatives; illustrate the legal background; demonstrate the roles of different stakeholders and finally, to bring together the lessons that have been learnt from practice over the past decade. The chapter has been categorised into sections describing:

- The national system of competence-based qualifications (section 2.1);
- The accreditation of informal and non-formal education outside VET / competence-based qualifications system (section 2.2);
- The National Certificate of Language Proficiency, that is, a test aimed at adults to measure their practical language skills, regardless of how and where their linguistic proficiency has been acquired (section 2.3); and
- The Computer Driving Licence (CDL) that was originally developed in Finland and is now a widely accepted tool to recognise and certify competencies in the ITC sector (section 2.4).

### 2.1 Competence-based qualification system

#### 2.1.1 Background and the general concept

The competence-based qualification system (*Näyttötutkinto*) is the most established form of validation in Finland. Competence-based qualifications can be awarded regardless of how and where the competencies and knowledge have been acquired. They can be demonstrated and accredited in officially approved practical skill demonstrations / tests<sup>2</sup>. Candidates can take their exams after or during formal training or without any formal training at all. In brief, the basic idea behind the system of competence-based qualifications is that adults with previous work and/or study experience should only study

1 Yrjölä, P. (2000) Näyttötutkintojärjestelmän kokonaisarviointi. National Board of Education.

2 Ahola (2003) Validation of prior learning in Finland. Nordic Council of Ministers.

those areas of study programmes that provide them with skills that they do not as yet command.

The competence-based qualifications came into force in 1994 with the implementation of the Vocational Qualifications Act 306/1994 and are now included in the Act on Vocational Adult Education (1998). The framework was created by the National Board of Education, in close co-operation with the main labour market organisations and teachers. Today, it practically functions as the framework for VET, and the national core curricula and the qualification requirements in vocational education and training are drawn up so that their starting point is to describe the goals of the curricula and qualification requirements in terms of learning outcomes.

There are three levels of competence-based vocational qualifications (initial, further and specialised). The initial vocational qualifications correspond with the vocational upper secondary qualifications, mainly taken by young people. The further and specialist vocational qualifications are mainly intended for adults with three to five years of work experience who wish to validate their practical competences and vocational skills. Further and specialist qualifications are also upper secondary level qualifications (but classified as ISCED 3 for further qualifications and ISCED 4 for specialist qualifications)<sup>1</sup>.

### 2.1.2 Assessment methods

Qualification guidelines determine both the qualification requirements and the means of demonstrating the skills. In terms of the latter, the most common methods are practical skill demonstrations, observation, interviews, questionnaires, portfolio work and/or project work.

Practical skill demonstrations are most common for those who are in employment<sup>2</sup>. They can last several days and they may be held at the candidate's own workplace, in another company or at the institute responsible for organising the test. It is also possible to obtain qualifications without tests, through portfolio work. A portfolio can include, for instance, work samples, descriptions of work tasks etc.

Competence-based skill tests are not designed or planned in accordance with existing training, in order to prevent tests from becoming, in effect, some sort of final examinations for training. Instead, the tests have been designed, on a tripartite basis, to demonstrate learning outcomes.

<sup>1</sup> Refernet (2006) Accumulating, transferring and validating learning; Overview of Finland. CEDEFOP.

<sup>2</sup> The following quoted from Haltia: Finnish competence-based qualifications – organisation, assessment and legitimacy.

### 2.1.3 The role of formal, preparatory training

The **non-formality** of the qualifications is, nevertheless, obscured to a small extent by the fact that the overwhelming majority (95%) of the candidates taking the tests choose to prepare themselves by undertaking some form of formal training<sup>1</sup>. This takes place although candidates can take their exams without any formal training at all. This issue was also highlighted by the first evaluation of the system, which concluded that *“in practice, virtually all graduates have undergone preparatory training in order to be able to cope with the examination. Therefore, the idea behind the system has not been achieved as such”*<sup>2</sup>.

The reason for the high number of individuals taking some form of formal training as a way of preparing for the skills tests is that it is not always possible for an employee to learn the whole variety of skills and competences required for a qualification at a single workplace, as a line of work in a single company can be restricted. A representative of EK, the Confederation of Finnish Industries, highlighted that although most participants choose to take additional courses to prepare themselves for the assessment, the system definitely does take into consideration informal and non-formal learning of the participants. This is proven by the fact that, on average, adults with prior work experience obtain one of the initial VET qualifications within 12 months, while it takes three years for young people without prior experience to reach the same qualification.

Preparatory training is regulated by the vocational skills requirements defined in the qualifications guidelines, and the training is usually tailored to each student individually. It is usually drafted jointly by the training provider and the student, and is structured to complement the student's prior learning and work experience.

### 2.1.4 Quality assurance<sup>3</sup>

In the mid-nineties, educational institutions in Finland were given greater powers to determine their own activities. With regards the competence-based education system, upper secondary schools and vocational institutes draw up their own curricula on the basis of core national curricula formulated by the National Board of Education. Generally speaking, training providers, qualification committees and/or educational institutions approve qualifications: there is no national quality assurance body. For the validation of non-formal and informal learning this decentralisation means that individual providers are given a great deal of freedom to apply the legislative framework.

<sup>1</sup> Nyssölä (2002) Koulun ulkopuolella opitun tunnustaminen. National Board of Education & Ahola (2003) Validation of prior learning in Finland. Nordic Council of Ministers.

<sup>2</sup> Yrjölä et al (2000) Näyttötutkintojärjestelmän kokonaisarviointi.

<sup>3</sup> Refernet (2006) Accumulating, transferring and validating learning; Overview of Finland. CEDEFOP.

However, in order to ensure the quality of the assessment system and an appropriate match with the demands of the labour market, co-operation with key labour market players is essential and has been at the heart of all activities since the development of the system. Provisions and operating methods have been designed together with social partners; new competence-based qualifications are approved, qualifications requirements are prepared, qualification committees are set up and the quality of competence test performances is assured, invariably and in all occasions, on a tripartite basis.

Indeed, the responsibility for organisation and supervision of the competence-tests rests with Qualification Committees, which also write up certificates for students who have completed their qualifications. The Qualification Committees are required to have trade union and employer representatives and teachers. The sectors in which a large proportion of workers are self-employed must ensure that their Qualification Committees have self-employed people on board too. The National Board of Education appoints the committees for a maximum of three years.

In addition, an organisation called Alvar has recently been established which deals mainly with the material for the tests within the competence-based qualification system. In this way, Alvar ensures quality and parity across the qualifications and across the country. It is also the task of this organisation to ensure quality, parity and reliability across the qualifications. Alvar is mainly funded by the National Board of Education.

#### 2.1.5 Take-up

The popularity of competence-based examinations has increased rapidly since their introduction and they have continued to strengthen their position in the Finnish education system. Besides 52 vocational upper secondary qualifications, there are around 300 further vocational and specialist vocational qualifications on offer.

The number of individuals taking part in the competence-based qualifications is growing. Between 1997 and 2006, just under **365,000** individuals took part in the system, some 199,000 obtained a full qualification and nearly 82,000 were partly qualified (see table below).

**Table 2.1 Competence-based vocational qualifications in Finland**

	Total number of participants		Number of participants who obtained full qualification		Number of participants of were partly qualified
		Of which women		Of which women	
<b>1997</b>	5,967	46%	4,237	48%	-
<b>1998</b>	12,923	49%	8,328	52%	-
<b>1999</b>	20,778	51%	12,971	54%	-

	Total number of participants		Number of participants who obtained full qualification		Number of participants of were partly qualified
		Of which women		Of which women	
<b>2000</b>	31,957	54%	18,077	54%	10,679
<b>2001</b>	37,019	56%	20,709	58%	9,953
<b>2002</b>	40,628	57%	23,383	60%	10,138
<b>2003</b>	43,090	57%	24,485	61%	9,960
<b>2004</b>	51,564	56%	28,144	59%	13,770
<b>2005</b>	58,541	57%	29,223	59%	13,429
<b>2006</b>	62,506	55%	29,799	59%	13,692

Source: ECOTEC Research & Consulting, 2007, on the basis of information from the Finnish national statistics office.

The statistics above indicate that the system has **increased significantly in popularity** over the past decade, particularly among women. At the start of the system, over half of all participants were male. Over the past years women have constituted over half of all participants, and women have a higher completion rate.

Most qualifications have been achieved in Social sciences, business and administration – equivalent to 27 per cent of all completed qualifications<sup>1</sup>. This is closely followed by qualifications in Technology, communications and transport (26%) and then Social services, health and sports (22%). The number of completed qualifications is low in the following fields (though the number is on the increase):

- Natural Sciences, natural resources and environment;
- Culture; and
- Education.

#### 2.1.6 Impact and further development

The competence-based qualification system is by far the most established and extensive public sector scheme for the validation of informal and non-formal learning in Finland. The overall impact of the system on vocational training has been positive<sup>2</sup>. It has resulted in increased consideration of labour market needs and increased co-operation between different labour and education organisations and private companies.

People completing competence-based qualifications or individual modules are usually adults aiming to improve their position in the labour market. Many who take part are unemployed or at risk of becoming unemployed. Anecdotal evidence therefore suggests that it has helped to upskill individuals who are in a vulnerable position in the labour market.

<sup>1</sup> Refernet (2006) Accumulating, transferring and validating learning; Overview of Finland. CEDEFOP.

<sup>2</sup> Yrjölä et al. (2000) Näyttötutkintojen kokonaisarviointi. National Board of Education.

It can also be concluded the competence-based qualification system not only aims but also succeeds, on a systematic basis, to identify, recognise and accredit informal and non-formal learning of the participants. Validation almost always leads to a shorter study period among adult learners. However, the validation of prior competencies rarely leads to a full qualification; most participants prepare themselves by undertaking some form of formal training, which is usually tailored to the individual's needs.

Dedication to the further development of the system is illustrated by the commitment of the Government to try and engage the hardest-to-reach groups (adults) in the competence-based education system. One of the ways to do this has been the recruitment of trade union representatives as 'learning agents'. The aim of this activity has been to use trade union representatives as a means of reaching out to those who are least likely to get involved in education and training – due to a variety of reasons, in particular low self-esteem and learning difficulties. This has taken place through the Noste Programme, which is an additional action programme operating from 2003–2009, targeted at low skilled adults aged between 30 and 59. The Programme provides an opportunity to complete upper secondary level vocational qualifications (vocational upper secondary education and training, further or specialist vocational qualifications) or specific modules free of charge.

The National Board of Education has also been active in improving the quality and effectiveness of the competence-based qualification system. The Individualisation of Adult Education and Training project, known as the AiHe project, was initiated in 2000 and continued until 2006. It involved 56 providers which were developing new operating methods and tools to individualise adult learning, in cooperation with workplaces<sup>1</sup>. An important target within the AiHe project was to identify and recognise competences through implementing individualised learning pathways. Providers and labour market experts were testing and evaluating new models and tools together with adult learners.

#### 2.1.7 Links to EQF

Although Finland has started work on the three-cycle framework for higher education, a parallel development is not foreseen for VET<sup>2</sup>. For this reason an overarching NQF covering all qualifications levels is not seen as an option in the short-term future, although the government has now decided to explore the possibility of developing a NQF. Finland will relate to the EQF without an overarching framework and has set up two expert groups to consider how best to do this. The main reservation about developing an overarching NQF is that the development would require extensive work that could confuse and distract providers from other necessary developments in the field of education and training.

<sup>1</sup> Refernet (2006) Accumulating, transferring and validating learning; Overview of Finland. CEDEFOP.

<sup>2</sup> Bjornavold, J. (2007)

However, the learning outcomes approach, that is at the core of VET already and increasingly in general and higher education too, is seen as fundamental for linking Finnish qualifications levels to the EQF, without setting up an overarching NQF.

## 2.2 Accreditation of informal and non-formal learning outside VET

The previous section has demonstrated in great detail how established validation of informal and non-formal learning is within the adult education sphere and VET more widely. The Act on Vocational Education (630/1998) makes validation in the field of VET a student's subjective right to some extent. There are provisions in place to enable validation in other parts of the education system too, but these provisions are by no means used to the same extent. In this section we look at these different laws and practices from other educational segments, and provide some information on their take-up.

### 2.2.1 Upper secondary schools

Based on an assessment of an individual's competencies, access may be granted to upper secondary schools and / or exemptions even if they do not meet the standard entry requirements:

- Exemptions

The legislative framework on upper secondary schools outlines that studies completed elsewhere, even outside formal education systems, can in special circumstances be accredited. The Act on Matriculation Examination 1000/1994 provides school principals with an opportunity to admit people directly to the final examination of the upper secondary school system - Matriculation Examinations (*Ylioppilastutkinto*) - who have not completed necessary studies. However, it has been suggested that only a handful of people are admitted to these Examinations without completion of necessary studies, and mostly in the case of foreign language examinations<sup>1</sup>.

- Access to studies

The legislation also permits people to apply for upper secondary schools even if they do not meet the standard entry requirements. Although necessary provisions and appropriate legislative frameworks are in place, the number of students whose informal or non-formal learning is recognised as part of an application for general studies at upper secondary schools (academic orientation) remains low. Most of these individuals have been

<sup>1</sup> Nyysölä (2002) Koulun ulkopuolella opitun tunnustaminen. National Board of Education

immigrants and Finnish nationals who have lived abroad and then returned / moved to Finland<sup>1</sup>.

The upper secondary schools with vocational orientation accept a greater number of candidates without standard entry qualifications than upper secondary schools with a general (academic) orientation. Approximately four per cent of people starting basic vocational education each year are chosen through the 'flexible student selection' that allows individuals to demonstrate their competencies and experience in the field in which they are aiming to study, while the legislation permits up to 30 per cent of students in any subject area to be selected on this basis<sup>2</sup>. In 2001, this came to 1,698 students and in 2002 some 1,770 students entered basic vocational education despite not meeting the standard entry requirements<sup>3</sup>.

## 2.2.2 Polytechnics

### ▪ Access to studies

According to the Act on Polytechnic Studies 225/1995, individuals can be accepted to polytechnics if they can demonstrate that they possess the competences required to complete the course they have applied for. Nevertheless, in higher education the emphasis has traditionally been more on accreditation of previous studies than on validation of informal and non-formal learning. In 2001 only 144 people were chosen through 'flexible student selection'. In 2002, the figure was slightly higher (188 people) but it is still less than one per cent of all students.

### ▪ Exemptions

The Act on Polytechnic studies 351/2003 states that individuals may be exempt from part(s) of the study programme if they are able to show that they have gained relevant knowledge through other studies (formal or non-formal), hobbies or work experience. There is limited evidence to suggest that competencies gained in previous studies and employment are taken into consideration in polytechnic adult education, as the students' average study period in polytechnic adult education is usually slightly shorter than study periods in 'regular' polytechnics<sup>4</sup>.

### ▪ Pilot project on further and specialist polytechnic qualifications

Between 2001 and 2005 the education authorities ran a pilot project on further and specialist polytechnic qualifications (*ammattikorkeakoulujen jatkotutkintokokeilu*). This pilot project, based on Decree 645/2001, provided individuals who possessed a polytechnic

<sup>1</sup> Lankinen, T. (2004) Aikaisemmin hankitun osaamisen tunnustaminen koulutusjärjestelmässä. Opetusministeriö.

<sup>2</sup> Lankinen, T. (2004) Aikaisemmin hankitun osaamisen tunnustaminen koulutusjärjestelmässä. Opetusministeriö.

<sup>3</sup> TAYH database

<sup>4</sup> Nyyssölä (2005) Achieving the Lisbon Goal: The Contribution of Vocational Education and Training Systems.

degree *and* three-years of relevant work experience with an opportunity to enter study programmes on further and specialist polytechnic qualifications.

### 2.2.3 Universities

There is separate legislation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning in universities (Act 645/1997, Decree 115/1998 and Decree 794/2004). This legislation permits people to apply for universities even if they do not meet the standard entry criteria (do not have appropriate formal qualifications). Individuals can be considered if they can, by other means, demonstrate that their prior learning (formal, informal or non-formal) has provided them with the necessary knowledge and competencies required for the successful completion of the qualification.

Evidence implies that the number of students whose informal or non-formal learning is officially recognised and consequently accredited during a university application process remains low. Exact information on the take-up is limited but data from the 2002/2003 semester shows that 335 individuals applied through 'flexible student selection' (0.5 per cent of all applicants), of which 76 were accepted (0.3 per cent of all applicants)<sup>1</sup>.

In addition to the flexible student selection to mainstream study programmes, universities also receive applications to other study schemes, for example, special master's degree programmes. The share of students who had their competencies validated – mainly competencies gained at workplace – during an application process to the special study programmes was 7 per cent in 2001/2002<sup>2</sup>.

Universities have been free to determine to what extent they utilise the opportunities that this law provides them with. Overall, the use of validation methods has varied from one university and faculty to another<sup>3</sup>. Traditionally teacher training faculties have been most active in this field. For example, the University of Lapland gives students of teacher training courses an exemption from the handicraft course if they can prove that they have learnt necessary competencies through hobbies and other activities.

The latest Decree (794/200) governing validation in the higher education sphere came into force on 1<sup>st</sup> August 2005. This decree brought a real impetus for the development of more coherent and reliable validation methods for the sector. A committee was appointed by the Ministry of Education in 2006 to review practices used by different higher education institutions (HEIs) regarding recognition of prior formal learning and validation of informal

<sup>1</sup> Lankinen, T. (2004) Aikaisemmin hankitun osaamisen tunnustaminen koulutusjärjestelmässä. Opetusministeriö.

<sup>2</sup> Lankinen, T. (2004) Aikaisemmin hankitun osaamisen tunnustaminen koulutusjärjestelmässä. Opetusministeriö.

<sup>3</sup> Lehtikoinen et al (2007) Aiemmin suoritettujen opintojen ja aiemmin opitun tunnustaminen korkeakouluissa. Opetusministeriö

and non-formal learning<sup>1</sup>. This committee prepared 25 recommendations for the recognition of prior learning in higher education institutions<sup>2</sup>.

In brief, the committee concluded that it should be every HE student's right to be able to have their learning (formal, informal and non-formal) validated. Hence, they recommended that HEIs should develop a consistent, reliable and transparent system for the recognition of prior learning, which is easily accessible to students, academic staff and stakeholders. Prior learning should be assessed in two different stages; during an assessment of eligibility for HE and during an assessment for exemptions. With regards to students, the study recommended that the methods applied should allow students to clearly demonstrate the range of competencies they possess.

### 2.3 National Certificate of Language Proficiency

The National Certificate of Language Proficiency is a test aimed at adults to measure their practical language skills, regardless of how and where their linguistic proficiency has been acquired. The tests measure language skills in practical situations in which an adult could be required to speak, listen, write or read a foreign language. Certificates are awarded by the provider organising the test and the person assessing the candidate.

The Act on language tests was passed in 1994 and the first national certificates of language proficiency were granted in the same year. Some 22,000 people were granted a Certificate by the end of 2003<sup>3</sup>. The test can now be taken in 9 different languages and there are over 100 educational institutions arranging tests. The following table displays the continuous increase in the popularity of the tests.

**Table 2.2 Number of National Certificates of Language Proficiency acquired since 1994**

Year	Certificates acquired	Year	Certificates acquired
1994	1,408	1999	2,209
1995	1,949	2000	2,487
1996	1,938	2001	2,275
1997	2,188	2002	2,467
1998	2,191	2003	2,865

Source: Centre for Applied Language Studies / Jyväskylä University

<sup>1</sup> Lehtikoinen et al (2007) Aiemmin suoritettujen opintojen ja aiemmin opitun tunnistaminen korkeakouluissa. Opetusministeriö

<sup>2</sup> Please note that the study took into consideration of recognition of formal, informal and non-formal learning.

<sup>3</sup> Centre for Applied Language Studies / Jyväskylä University

The National Board of Education developed the National Certificate in Language Proficiency test with help from its language examination committee, which has 9 members (most with language teaching experience) and has a 3-year mandate<sup>1</sup>. The committee monitors the tests at providers approved by the National Board of Education.

## 2.4 Computer Driving Licence

The Finnish Information Technology Development Centre (TIEKE) together with the education and labour administration and labour market organisations launched in 1994 a Computer Driving Licence (CDL) that has since become a widely acknowledged proof of information technology skills, not only in Finland but all over the world. More than 144,000 people have obtained the licence in Finland and over four hundred educational institutions in the country have been granted a permit from TIEKE to carry out tests and grant the certificate. Four different types of certificate have been developed to match the different levels of know-how and skills most often required in the information society.

The European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) has now been introduced in some 130 countries<sup>2</sup>.

### Example – CDL

There are currently three levels of testing, which measure the candidate's skills, ranging from beginner to advanced user: General user (@) certificate; A certificate; and AB certificate.

There is soon to be a new level, for competence in wireless communication. Candidates can start with the lowest (@) certificate, and move on to the higher levels, with the AB certificate representing advanced skills.

The examination takes the form of a skills test arranged by training organisations (e.g. schools, universities and workplaces). The two lower-level tests can be taken in Finnish, Swedish and English. The advanced (AB) test can be taken in Finnish and Swedish.

*Source: Refernet (2006) Accumulating, transferring and validating learning; Overview of Finland. CEDEFOP.*

TIEKE is the managing and developing body behind the initiative, and is responsible for granting the permit for providers to arrange the test and to grant the certificate. The development work of the CDL was initially co-financed by the Ministry of Education. The development of the European Computer Driving Licence was partly financed by the European Leonardo da Vinci programme. A Committee, consisting of representatives from educational institutions, social partners and national education and employment authorities, leads the development work of the Licence.

<sup>1</sup> Refernet (2006) Accumulating, transferring and validating learning; Overview of Finland. CEDEFOP.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ecdl.fi>

The CDL tests have no official standing in Finland, and are not covered by legislation, but are, however, widely known and accepted in the labour market.

## 3.0 PRIVATE SECTOR

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Due to the simple fact that social partners and individual companies play such an integral role in the competence-based qualification scheme, the involvement of the private sector in the validation of informal and non-formal learning is very practical and strong. In the previous section we have already also illustrated that their engagement in the system stretches from national to local level. In this section we describe their role in greater detail and also provide some examples from individual companies.

### 3.1.1 Social partners

In relation to the motive for being involved, the labour market organisations have a vested interest in the competence-based qualification system as it has been created to meet the needs of the labour market. Their involvement extends from planning and design of the system to actual implementation. In practice this means that education and training policies and related laws, including those related to the validation of informal and non-formal learning, are negotiated in tripartite working groups and committees. For instance, the Adult Education Council of Finland, which is an independent expert advisory body of the Ministry of Education, has social partners as members. The task of the Council is to prepare reports on adult education & training and adopt positions on future policy priorities.

Another two important tripartite advisory bodies dealing with validation are the Advisory Board for Educational Cooperation and the Council for Labour and Education Affairs. Social partners are also represented in the education and training committees of the National Board of Education and sector specific education committees organised by the Ministry of Education.

The overall involvement of social partners in education and training at local (and regional) levels has increased in recent years with the expansion of the competence-based examination system (as well as with an increase in practical, work-placed training). At local and regional level it is the role of tripartite qualification committees, appointed by the National Board of Education, to supervise the organisation of the competence-based tests and confirm approved qualifications<sup>1</sup>.

In addition, Alvar, which has the task of facilitating and further developing the operation of the competence-based qualification system, has a steering committee consisting of 22

<sup>1</sup> VET providers nominate local boards (representatives of employers, employees, VET providers, teachers and students of the field concerned) to ensure the quality of vocational skills demonstrations. The board decides on the arrangement and assessment of skills demonstrations and awards appropriate certificates.

different social partner organisations and representatives from the National Board of Education and Ministry of Education.

### 3.1.2 Individual companies

A growing number of companies are making use of the opportunities provided by the competence-based education system. They are using the broader framework of the system to recognise skills and competences that their employees have acquired at work and in other parts of life (in formal, informal or non-formal settings). We have found a range of different companies which are active in this field. The companies / organisations range from public to private employers and social enterprises, from large to small businesses and from traditional manufacturing businesses to companies competing in new markets. Some examples are:

- **Nicemedia** is a social enterprise in Pukkila specialising in IT support and sales, web development, training etc. This small enterprise has helped several of its employees to officially qualify through the competence-based qualification system. Validation of learning gained in the workplace has been at the heart of the whole practice.
- The Ministry of Education awarded the 2007 apprentice / competence-based qualification quality prize to **Are Oy**. Are Oy is a family-owned real estate / construction company employing in the region of 1,500 workers mainly in Finland, but also in Russia, Estonia and Latvia. The company has trained a considerable share of its employees over the past decade through the apprenticeship and competence-based qualification scheme. Continuing training and validation of prior learning have become a key HR and business strategy for the company.
- **Finnair**, the Finnish airline, has established schemes especially in the technical and maintenance side of their business.
- **Fortum Gas**, which is a leading gas company in the Nordic area, has extensive experience in providing employees with an opportunity to obtain an official qualification that matches the key competences they have learnt in the work place (in the field of chemistry and management).

Finally, in the last Inventory we introduced Koskisen Oy, which since the early nineties has been developing training and assessment methods in order to recognise and, at the same time, broaden the skill levels of its employees. Their initiative has not only benefited the employees and the company itself but it has had a wider impact on the industry sector. The experience from Koskisen Oy is presented in the box below<sup>1</sup>.

#### Example – Koskisen Oy

Koskisen Oy is a manufacturing company in the field of wood production. During the past 10 years some 400 employees (approx. 37% of all employees) have been able to validate the skills and learning they have acquired at work and have obtained an official qualification.

The company offers 'in-house' training, which together with work experience provides employees with an opportunity to attain one of a range of nationally recognised competence-based qualifications (various wood production and management qualifications).

The skills are assessed by a team that consists of an external assessor and employer and employee representatives. The assessment is made up of practical and written skills tests. All the participants require 1-2 years of work experience.

The validation and certification has had significant individual, company and industry level impacts:

- Individual benefits (employees):
  - Improved self-confidence.
  - Broadened and improved skill-base.
  - Greater understanding and adoption of work processes and tasks.
  - Opportunities for higher pay and grants.
- Benefits to the company:
  - Multi-skilled, motivated, committed, adaptable employees.
  - The company has succeeded to transform itself from a basic manufacturing enterprise into a high value-added production company – the highly skilled workforce has been the fundamental base.
  - Transformation towards a team-working culture – staff members increasingly work together and are able to replace one another during absences.
  - Move towards a more equal, less hierarchical employee structure due to increased skill levels.
  - National level recognition for its human resources policies.
  - Excellent working environment and low staff turnover levels (turnover levels have reduced by 35% in ten years).
  - A number of national certificates / awards (e.g. award for good employer, best apprenticeship scheme provider of the year, best place to work 2004 'Suomen parhaat työnantajat 2004' - 2nd position and the only awarded manufacturing company)
  - In spite of the major role of education and training, the productivity levels have always remained high. During the early training periods, the productivity of each participating employee slightly falls but in the longer term significantly improves as a result of new skills and motivation.
- Wider impact:
  - Has helped to raise the status and credibility of the wood production industry.
  - The largest companies in the same industry (e.g. Stora Enso, UPM) have now also introduced similar procedures.

<sup>1</sup> Source: Interview with Esa Kallinen from Koskisen Oy.

## 4.0 THIRD SECTOR

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Like the public and private sectors, the third sector has also been relatively active in the field of validation of informal and non-formal learning in Finland. Liberal adult education (non-certificate-orientated learning) has a strong foot-hold in Finnish society, thus the way in which formal education institutes and employers take into consideration learning which has taken place within the non-formal education sphere is of both great interest and importance to a range of different stakeholders.

Below, the first section discusses two more established examples of co-operation between formal education establishments and third sector organisation in the field of validation. The second section summarises information from Lauri Savisaari on the youth initiative, the Recreational Activity Study Book.

### 4.1 Validation within the liberal adult education system

#### 4.1.1 Background

Non-formal learning, mainly in the form of liberal adult education, has a long tradition in Finland. The liberal adult education system offers non-formal (non-certificate-oriented) studies that provide adults with opportunities to develop themselves in liberal adult education establishments without degree-related or occupational goals, for example, in foreign languages, IT, physical education, social studies, arts and music.

The objectives and content of liberal adult education are not decided by national policy or curricula; such decisions are made by the liberal adult education institutes independently or together with the communities behind these institutes. Typical liberal adult education establishments are folk high schools, adult education centres and study centres (*kansalais- ja työväenopistot, kansanopistot ja opintokeskukset*). The essential characteristic in liberal adult education is that participation is voluntary. The study formats range from evening classes to full-day and weekend courses.

#### 4.1.2 The importance of validation within the liberal adult education system

In 2003 Jukka Määttä carried out a large-scale study on validation of learning gained within the liberal adult education system<sup>1</sup>. The results are based on a survey of folk high schools, adult education centres, study centres and other liberal adult education institutes.

<sup>1</sup> Jukka Määttä (2003) Tunnusta ja tunnista opittu! Vapaan sivistystyön opitun tunnustaminen formaalissa oppilaitoksissa Selvitys muodoista, käytänteistä, yhteistyösuhteista ja ongelmista.

The study found that the issue of identification, recognition and accreditation of non-formal learning is of great importance to the third sector organisations engaged in education and training. About 59 per cent of respondents stated that the validation of non-formal learning was a 'very important' issue for them. Only one respondent did not see validation as an important topic.

One of the key questions for the survey was to find out the way in which individuals benefit from validation of learning gained within the liberal adult education institutes. Over forty per cent of all the providers of non-formal learning stated that studies in their institutes give 'application points' for individuals who wish to continue studies in the formal education system (in many formal education institutes the demand exceeds the supply, thus the candidates have to go through an application process, based for example on a point system and/or tests). In addition, a small minority of respondents reported that completion of certain courses guarantees a direct admission either to entry examinations or to the course itself. With regards to the latter, most of these cases are based on a systematic co-operation between providers of non-formal training and formal educational establishments.

With regards to the validation of non-formal learning leading to exemptions, an overwhelming majority of respondents stated that they were aware of formal educational establishments which provided full or partial course exemptions for those who had successfully completed courses through non-formal learning<sup>1</sup>. Usually these exemptions were in the field of handicrafts, IT, arts, religious studies and languages.

#### 4.1.3 Challenges

According to the Ministry of Education, in order to further develop methods for the validation of non-formal learning within liberal adult education provision, the providers of non-formal education need to describe the content of their courses better<sup>2</sup>. A thorough understanding of learning outcomes is vital for the validation process, but currently the level of detail varies greatly from one certificate and one provider to another. Jukka Määttä identified the lack of information on the course content as a problem too. He called for a more methodological and careful documentation of (non-formal) course contents and recommended that liberal adult education providers should issue certificates more systematically. However, according to him the main challenge is to convince formal education providers to acknowledge the value of non-formal learning provided by third sector organisations and other providers. On the other hand, he also points out that any development work in this field must respect the autonomy and independence of the many educational providers from the third sector, and the target groups that they cater for.

<sup>1</sup> This finding somewhat contradicts the statistics held by public authorities (see section 2.2).

<sup>2</sup> Lankinen, T. (2004) Aikaisemmin hankitun osaamisen tunnustaminen koulutusjärjestelmässä. Opetusministeriö.

#### 4.1.4 Practical examples

One of the most effective ways of developing systems and mechanisms for the recognition of non-formal qualifications is a close collaboration between providers (non-formal and formal) to ensure complementarity between local non-formal and formal education provision. Such co-operation in Finland is common in certain sectors and /or in more remote areas. In remote areas finding complementarity between formal and non-formal learning can not only make economic sense but can also ensure a greater variety of courses in a given locality. The Northern Lapland educational networking project (*Tunturi-Lapin alueen koulutuksen verkostoitumishanke*) can be given as an example.

##### **Example - Northern Lapland educational networking project (*Tunturi-Lapin alueen koulutuksen verkostoitumishanke*)**

Northern Lapland is one of the most remote and sparsely populated regions in the European Union.

The aim of this project was to increase collaboration between regional providers of non-formal education and formal educational institutes as a way of expanding the regional course portfolio. The project has involved ten upper secondary and other formal schools / institutes and four providers of non-formal education.

As a result, the consortium has developed a wide range of courses that play on the strengths of all different providers taking part in the project. The local residents benefit from the project by having a bigger variety of courses to them as the courses taken within the non-formal education can be counted towards formal qualifications.

Another example can be found from the field of arts and handicrafts.

##### **Example – Handicrafts and arts in Mid-Finland (*Käsi- ja taideteollinen yhteistyö Keski-Suomessa*)**

The Mid-Finland Handicraft and Art School (*Keski-Suomen käsi- ja taideteollisen oppilaitos*) and the Institute representing employees in the Jyväskylä region (*Jyväskylän kaupungin työväenopiston*) have had a method in place for the validation of non-formal learning since 1992. These two educational (formal and non-formal) establishments have worked together to ensure that the students of the Mid-Finland Handicraft and Art School can access official validation for the studies that they have completed at the Institute representing employees in the Jyväskylä region. In other words, a successful completion of one of the textile courses of this third sector Institute leads to an exemption at the Mid-Finland Handicraft and Art School.

This has been established by close collaboration between these two establishments. The textile courses at the Institute were created in consultation with staff from the art school. A director of the school has also personally attended some of the courses of the Institute to learn about their content and to assess complementarity between their own courses and those of the Institute.

Today the students of the Institute receive a certificate upon a successful completion of one of their courses, which are officially recognised by the Mid-Finland Handicraft and Art School.

## 4.2 Recreational Activity Study Book<sup>1</sup>

One of the earliest efforts to promote the validation of non-formal learning was the creation of Recreational Activity Study Book in 1996. The study book was developed by Youth Academy, which is the main youth NGO in the country. The study book is a portfolio / CV of learning experiences in voluntary and leisure activities. The book serves young people as a tool for making all the experiences and learning outside formal schooling visible. It is also an instrument for identifying and crediting non-formal learning when applying for a job or further education.

### 4.2.1 Concept

The Recreational Activity Study Book system is feasible for the documentation – and recognition – of both qualifications and competencies acquired by participating in youth voluntary activities. More focus is, however, placed on the competencies. That is because the study book system is centred on the individual learner. In the study book, more emphasis is put on the development of each young person's personality rather than the actual qualifications of the skills required in particular job requirements. The underlying idea is that by participating in youth voluntary or recreational activities, young people do have a chance to acquire key competencies with regard to personal development, such as social, communicative etc. competencies.

There are no criteria for the measurement of learning outcomes or performance, nor are there any public examinations held to assess the competencies acquired by the young people. There are several reasons for the openness and "non-measurability" of the Finnish study book system. First of all, subjective perceptions of learning outcomes or competencies acquired should not be of marginal validity, as they often are in systems depending on public examinations. The second reason for the openness and flexibility of the study book system is the appreciation of the voluntary nature of youth informal and non-formal learning which has already been mentioned. By formalising the system, the basic motivation for participation in youth activities, i.e. the joy of being, doing and learning together, would be endangered. Youth Academy tries to encourage the representatives of the formal education system to recognise and value the learning and competencies young people acquire outside school, as well as to cooperate more with organisations offering young people meaningful learning environments. But the issue is always approached from an individual learner's point of view, not the point of view of the formal educational system, for example. The third reason for keeping the study book system informal and flexible is that by doing so, all young people can gain access to it and collect entries from various learning activities. The Study Book is not only targeted to those young people who are

<sup>1</sup> Information quoted from Lauri Savisaari (2005) Recreational Activity Study Book. European Inventory 2005.

active in one or another youth organisation. Competencies can be acquired and things can be learned in various situations and settings, even the non-organised ones<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, even though the study book system is developed by Youth Academy and its twelve member organisations (major Finnish youth and sports NGOs), it is open to all young people, and the content is designed in a way that all young people “fit” in to be able to make use of it.

#### 4.2.2 Content of the study book

The study book itself is divided into nine categories, according to the nature of the learning activity. The categories are:

1. Regular participation in leisure activities;
2. Positions of trust and responsibility within NGOs;
3. Activities as a leader, trainer or coach;
4. Participation in a project;
5. Courses;
6. International activities;
7. Workshop activities (apprenticeship);
8. Competitions; and
9. Other activities.

#### 4.2.3 Accreditation

The educational institutions involved in the system have a written agreement with Youth Academy on how and to what extent they value and credit the entries in the book. It is essential to bear in mind that accreditation and validation of the learning experiences documented in the study book is always individual and case-sensitive. The system does not aim for direct accreditation in formal education in any way. It is of great importance that the voluntary nature of participating and learning in voluntary youth activities, whether organised or not, will not be endangered.

#### 4.2.4 Outcome

The Youth Academy has a written agreement with 250 formal educational institutions on how to value and credit the entries in the book. Over 80,000 Study Books have been distributed so far<sup>1</sup>.

The Youth Academy carries out biannual surveys on how the Study Book is actually used and how the product could be developed. The main results from the surveys have been to find out that, although some young people actually have used the book when applying to further education or a job, most of the study book users are somewhat passive in using the

<sup>1</sup> Nuorten Akatemia ([www.nuortenakatemia.fi](http://www.nuortenakatemia.fi)), September 2007.

book. The most important function for the Study Book users seems to be that the book is a black-on-white documentary for themselves on what has actually taken place in their youth.

The educational institutions involved in the Recreational Activity Study Book system have not always found it easy to use in recognition and valuing previous learning experiences of young people. This has mostly to do with the fact that the book is structured according to the nature of voluntary free-time activities rather than according to the curricula of different formal educational institutions. A more competence-based approach would suit the educational institutions better, and probably some young people as well. However, it has been a strong strategic – and even ideological – decision by the Academy and its member organisations that the Recreational Activity Study Book should be structured upon the activities, not the competencies. This has to do with the more general question in youth work and youth policy about to what extent can youth work focus on the employability of young people. The answer to that question has been – at least this far – that youth work focuses on the development of the individual, not merely on employability issues.

## 5.0 CONCLUSIONS

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Methodologies and practices for the validation of informal and non-formal learning in Finland are common in all three sectors that we have analysed in this study. Since the nineties, public authorities have believed that education and training policies should take advantage of non-formal education and also consider other, informal spheres of life (work, civil society activities and hobbies) as learning environments. The first third-sector initiatives in the field of validation date back to the early nineties, and even if the engagement of private sector has been more recent, today their role is practical, strong and important.

With regards to the **public sector**, the Finnish legislation makes validation in the field of VET a subjective right for students to some extent. In fact, recognition of prior informal and non-formal learning has become an established feature of the VET and adult education system, through the development of the competence-based qualification system. The competence-based qualifications not only aim but also succeed, on a systematic basis, to identify, recognise and accredit informal and non-formal learning of the participants. Validation in almost all cases leads to a shorter study period among adult learners. Indeed the main aim of validation is to shorten study periods, rather than fully remove formal learning; a considerable majority of participants prepare themselves by undertaking some form of formal training, which is usually tailored to the needs of each individual.

There are legal provisions in place to enable validation in other parts of the education system too, but these provisions are by no means used to the same extent yet. Only a small percentage of candidates to universities, polytechnics and upper secondary schools have their competencies successfully validated as the focus among these institutes still remains on formal qualifications. However, the learning outcomes approach that is at the core of VET already and increasingly in general and higher education too, is driving the validation agenda forward. For example, there have been significant developments in the HE sector since the last Inventory. The latest Decree (794/200) governing validation in the higher education sphere came into force on 1<sup>st</sup> August 2005, bringing real impetus for the development of more coherent and reliable validation methods for the HE sector. A committee was also appointed by the Ministry of Education in 2006 to review practices used by different higher education institutions (HEIs) regarding recognition of prior formal learning and validation of informal and non-formal learning.

With regards to the **private sector**, through the competence-based qualification system the involvement of social partners and individual companies in validation has become practical – and their engagement in the system stretches from national to local level.

Like the public and private sectors, **the third sector** has also been active in the field of validation of informal and non-formal learning in Finland. However, the further development of methodologies in this sector is challenged by complexities around ensuring on one hand the rigidity and validity of the assessment methods and the needs of the target groups on the other.