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

Estonia – By Aili Saluveer
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1.0 VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN ESTONIA

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1.1 Introduction

Estonia is in the midst of a major transition process involving all sectors: policy, education, the labour market and third sector. The developments of the first decade following the restoration of independence have received considerable support from international cooperation: Estonia has joined the Bologna and Sorbonne conventions establishing a European Higher Education Area as well as the Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region and has adopted the Recognition of Foreign Professional Qualifications Act.

Since 1992, Estonia has made constant progress in the gradual establishment and improvement of the education system and related legislation. The legal framework was built up concurrently with changes in the subject matter, including the perceived need to take account of non-formal and informal learning. The Universities Act and Applied Higher Education Institutions Act now allows for accreditation of prior and experiential learning (APEL) in HE curricula. Universities and higher education institutions are working out their internal regulations for implementing APEL, collecting useful information and trying to implement suitable best practice. There are not many activities in vocational education, but providers need to start preparing curricula and training programs according to the professional standards.

In the rapidly changing job market one could follow two slightly opposite trends: on the one hand, great attention to official qualifications in some situations, on the other hand, valuing work experience more than a university degree. Requirements for professional qualifications are worked out for many professions.

In the national policy agenda one can notice remarkable trends and discussions between universities, other educational institutions, the Ministry of Education, NGOs and employers in conferences and forums as well as in specific workgroups about accreditation of prior and experiential learning.

1.2 Review of existing initiatives: Public Sector

1.2.1 Increasing need for validation initiatives

There have been big changes taking place in Estonian educational policy in recent years. Starting the reform of higher education according to the principles of Bologna Declaration in 2001, Estonian Universities recognized the need for accreditation of prior formal learning. Being the second reform during the last ten years, it brought along many new qualifications that differed from the previous ones both in purpose and length of study. However, this is just one of the aspects promoting new discussion around accreditation of prior learning and also of work experience.

Together with curriculum reform, there was also reform of HE institutions. Many previous vocational non-HE institutions were reformed to vocationally oriented HE institutions, which then created the need for transfer of studies between different levels of education.

During the last fifteen years the education system and curricula have become much more open, giving greater opportunity to take into account learning that is not exactly connected to the field of studies concerned. Educational institutions in different areas are interested in valuing prior learning and work experience and are implementing the system and procedures for APEL. During the last six years the number of students in Estonian universities has doubled to 60,000.

Within this context, the University of Tartu initiated its APEL system in 2001. In June 2002, an international conference on APEL was held in Tartu with the help of the THENUCE network. This conference and the example of the system at the University of Tartu initiated several discussions in other universities as well as at the Ministry of Education, and brought along two new projects in the same field. By February 2003, the University of Tartu together with the Ministry of Education had completed a survey covering APEL practices and attitudes across Estonia in all sectors (within the European Transfine project). The new version of the Universities Act (approved at the end of January 2003) now allows 50% of the HE curriculum to be obtained through APEL. Most of the HE institutions have now worked out their internal regulations for implementing APEL, but not all of them are available on websites for the public.

Higher education institutions are more interested in recognising prior certified learning rather than in valuing non-certified or informal learning. The main problem is the rigidity of the academic staff and lack of knowledge in the field of assessment of informal and experiential learning as well as lack of good instruments for the purpose of assessment.

In vocational education one may not find many activities, but there is great opportunity to recognize learning from experience. Discussions have begun on the subject and vocational education is now preparing curricula and training programs according to the professional standards.

1.2.2 Development plans

In 2001, the Minister of Education formed an expert work group for the purpose of developing *the Estonian lifelong learning strategy*. Employees representing various education sectors and levels, large and small enterprises and the public sector as well as various fields of activity were appointed as members of the work group.

The Estonian national development plan for introduction of the Structural Funds of the European Union – a single programme document for 2003-2006. In connection with the integration into the European Union, the Structural Funds of the EU, where one can apply for funds for promoting various fields, will open to the Estonian state. The European Social Fund also provides funds for the promotion of adult education. One of the priorities is working out the system and regulations for the accreditation of prior and experiential learning.

The experts formulated recommendations with respect to the national adult education priorities, which is enforced as of July 2004. The national adult education priorities are adopted by the Government of the Republic and the draft State Budget Act allocates the means for realisation of the priorities.

National adult education priorities for 2004-2006 are as follows:

- 1) Providing better access to the life long learning for adults, including those who have dropped out of education;
- 2) Development of the counselling system for adults, including career counselling and study information database for adults;
- 3) Development of the system for accreditation of prior and experiential learning;
- 4) Development of the Model for financing adult education, including changes to the taxation system to motivate employers to invest in the schooling of their employees;
- 5) Quality assurance of adult education, including work-related training.

The Ministry of Education and Research and the National Adult Education Council have worked out a *National adult education development plan for 2005-2008*. There is one chapter about national initiatives in the accreditation of prior and experiential learning and about development of the national regulations and system for APEL guidance and counselling.

1.2.3 Example from the University of Tartu

The University of Tartu is the first in Estonia, to have worked out the system and the procedures for the accreditation of prior studies and work experience and is now in the implementation stage. Since summer 2003 an APEL specialist has worked at the University of Tartu to, amongst other things, develop the tools for APEL, information and guidance materials and to establish and develop a counselling and assessment jury system across the whole university.

Three regulations for implementing APEL at the University of Tartu are as follows: part in the Regulations of Admission, part in the Regulations of Tuition, Rector's directive for the implementation of the system. Depending on the volume of the accredited subjects or work experience, the application is reviewed either by the lecturer of the given subject or the committee (academic staff only) appointed by the Dean of the Faculty. A particular subject will be assessed by the lecturer, a bigger group of subjects (from 5 credits) and the qualification requirements for admission will be assessed by the committee. The student is given a written answer within one month from the date of submission of the application. If necessary, the assessor may demand additional documents, the compilation of a portfolio, an examination or an informal interview. The decisions of accreditation of prior learning and work experience may be contested according to the procedures provided by the Regulations of Studies. Methods used for accreditation of prior learning are summative assessment and credit transfer.

The University of Tartu is partner in two European APEL related projects – VaLEx (Valuing Learning from Experience) and REFINE (REcognising Formal, Informal and Non-formal

Education). Local partners in these projects are, for Valex; Universities and higher education sector and NGOs and for Refine; higher education sector, vocational education sector and youth sector. Activities in these projects are: piloting the use of the portfolio for accreditation of informal and non-formal learning, creating a course program for this and developing support materials for students, counsellors and APEL assessors.

1.3 Review of existing initiatives: Private sector

Employers have always appreciated prior formal, non-formal and informal learning upon hiring people and valued work experience as well as other skills, personal characteristics and abilities. The main tool used for first evaluation is the CV and interview as the next step. Most companies have worked out a personnel policy and internal rules for measuring the potential of the applicant, but these rules are not available publicly.

There are some useful internet-portals, CV-Online for employers and employees; Rajaleidja (Pathfinder) for young people that contains many interesting and useful materials about studies, training opportunities, how to find work, compile a better CV and some additional information for self evaluation and self development.

In the job market one could follow two slightly opposite trends: on the one hand, great attention to official qualifications in some situations, on the other hand, valuing work experience more than a university degree.

- (1) Requirements for professional qualifications are worked out or elaborated for many professions. Several qualification requirements became more difficult to achieve. In some public service occupations an official degree (Master's degree) enables employees to receive a salary that is higher by 10%.
- (2) In many cases, employers value work experience more than a university degree. Several reasons for this can be found, for example, a rapidly changing labour market that values recent work experience over 'old' education; many SME (small and medium enterprises) managers have not themselves completed a university degree and therefore do not value it; new and rather liberal regulations that have resulted in a plethora of new HE institutions being established during the last ten years which are considered as being of low quality and therefore, whose education provision is not valued.

Today the main activity is setting professional standards. The Professions Act provides the basis for the development of the requirements for professional qualifications and the conditions and procedures for the attestation and award of professional qualifications.

As assigning a profession is not obligatory and is not directly related to studies in the profession but at the same time, to meet the qualification requirements, it is necessary to complete certain additional training or work independently, one can agree that assigning a profession may be related to APEL.

Employers are interested in certifying employees' skills as this is important for staff policy development, for the benchmarking of the company and for competitiveness in the market.

The representatives of over 1,500 different institutions (companies, training providers, professional and vocational associations) participated in active development of professional standards between 1998 and 2004. As of September 2004, professional councils have approved 419 professional qualifications as professional standards. A professional standard is a document which establishes the requirements for knowledge, skills, experience, values and personal characteristics necessary for the professional qualification.

The award of professional qualifications is a process in the course of which a person attests the level of his or her professional competence and a body which awards professional qualifications assesses the match to the professional qualifications applied for and issues a professional certificate.

Methods of attestation of professional qualifications are:

- 1) Written or oral examination;
- 2) Test assignment;
- 3) Attestation on the basis of documents; or
- 4) A combination of the above methods.

There are no certain instruments for assessment of non-formal and informal learning, a description of professional activities is mostly used in the form of a CV or statements from employers.

Example from one of the biggest employers of Estonia – Hansabank

The companies of the Hansabank Group share a common personnel policy, aimed at guaranteeing the competence of all units in carrying out the strategies and goals of the organisation through consistency and staff and maintaining their reputation as a valued employer. Prior to the recruitment process the tasks and requirements for the new employee are described. The recruitment process is objective, systematic and fair. On selection, measuring the potential of the applicant goes beyond the specific vacancy. Hansabank's aim is to create and pursue long-term bilateral employment relations with staff members.

1.4 Review of existing initiative: The Third Sector

There are some very active NGOs, like the Association of Estonian Adult Educators ANDRAS, Estonian Non-formal Adult Education Association, Estonian Education Forum and Estonian Association for Personnel Development PARE, that are the main links between formal, non-formal and informal education, employers and the public sector.

The Association of Estonian Adult Educators (AEAE) ANDRAS is an Estonian non-governmental organisation, which unites the representatives of different branches of adult education and aims at increasing the competence of its members in the field of andragogics. The Estonian Education Forum's (Eesti Haridusfoorum) main activities are development of a concept of education policy based on as extensive social agreement as possible, and promoting of social partnership with the public sector.

The Estonian Association for Personnel Development PARE connects human resource professionals. PARE draws attention to the importance of human resource management in society, gathers and mediates human resource management know-how, creates opportunities for personnel staff for professional development and regular exchange of information.

The youth sector is interested in this topic as well, they have organised a conference about valuing informal learning and are involved in a number of projects.

NGOs representing all of the most important interest groups in educational policy are taking an active part in forming the educational policy, executing educational research, organising training, seminars and conferences and gathering and distributing information concerning adult education. The main aim of the NGOs is to support democratic processes like participation, partnership and social agreement in Estonian education policy. They have co-operated with different public and private organisations, including the Ministry of Education to compose the concept and strategic plan for the Estonian education system. One of the main forms of activity is the annual educational forum process - a set of conferences where the situation of education in Estonia is discussed and where the education and labour policy principles of Estonia are developed, specified and improved. Such an approach enables the moulding of a consensus among different interest groups as regards the draft resolutions prepared by experts, which should result in the realisation of the adopted resolutions.

1.5 Conclusions

According to the national regulations it is possible to apply APEL in some cases but it has not been regulated in detail. If there are any regulations for the application of APEL at all, then these are internal regulations for a given institution. As the process of the accreditation of prior and experiential learning started only in recent years, there is no qualitative or quantitative information on the results of the initiative yet. Some research is done on mapping of non-formal education /adult education.

In the national policy agenda one can notice remarkable trends and the Ministry of Education together with other stakeholders has prepared some important documents connected with validation of non-formal and informal learning like *National adult education priorities* and a *National adult education development plan*.

The University of Tartu is working as a promoter in this field. There are different activities involving co-operation between Universities as well as other educational institutions and the Ministry of Education for development of APEL tools and practices in Estonia and to promote the APEL Network in Estonia. There is a need for good tools for accreditation of informal and experiential learning as well as for improving the skills of APEL assessors and for setting and implementing quality standards for APEL. Another important aspect is the need for improvement of the system of APEL guidance and counselling in Estonia. Estonian Universities have already prepared a project proposal for Structural Funds of the European Union to request funding for achieving these goals.

Employers agree that there is a need to work out common criteria for recognizing APEL in Estonia. The State has started to create an official system by working out professional standards and professional qualifications and adopting laws on professional qualification. But there is no vision of the system in its entirety. People are aware of the need to create uniform principles and tools to simplify comparison of qualifications.

The third sector has taken an active role and is working together with other sectors in forming education policy in Estonia.

Although existing information and practical experience in validation of non-formal and informal learning is rather limited, Estonia is now in an active position in the development of the system, tools and procedures for recognition of prior and experiential learning.