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

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1.0 VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN FINLAND

By Anne-Mari Nevala (ECOTEC Research and Consulting)

1.1 Introduction

Finland is one of the few European countries that has permanent systems and comprehensive national policies in place for validating informal and non-formal learning. The public and voluntary sectors in Finland have had a number of validation initiatives in place for over a decade and the private sector, as well as social partners, are integrated into the planning and development work of those initiatives. The implementation of competence-based qualifications, the National Certificate of Language Proficiency and the Computer Driving Licence are prime examples of the ways in which competence and skills acquired outside of formal education system are recognised in Finland.

The following chapters will look at the central validation initiatives of public, private and third sectors, discuss their institutional frameworks and summarise their key outcomes.

1.2 Review of existing Initiatives: Public Sector

Validation activities are, to a great extent, decentralised in Finland - each individual education institution is provided with a significant level of freedom. The Finnish public authorities have been active in developing national initiatives to recognise informal and non-formal learning since the early nineties. Public authorities believe education policies should take advantage of non-formal education and also consider other spheres of life (work, civil society activities and hobbies) as learning environments². Furthermore, key competences (such as communication and problem solving skills) play an increasingly important role in today's economically competitive societies and labour markets, hence informal and non-formal learning environments are regarded as equally important in developing them as formal education.

The following sections will introduce the four validation structures of the Finnish public authorities and impact and outputs of each initiative.

1.2.1 Competence-based qualifications

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 skills and knowledge have been acquired; knowledge, skills and competence can be demonstrated in officially approved tests¹. The qualifications came into force in 1994 through 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 a close co-operation with the main labour market organisations and teachers. The Board is active in improving the system and funds a number of current development projects such as AIHE and [W@KKU](#).

¹ Ahola (2003) Validation of prior learning in Finland. Nordic Council of Ministers.

There are three levels of competence-based vocational qualifications (basic, further and specialised). The initial vocational qualifications can be obtained through tests that are similar to those taken by young people in vocational education. 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. Nevertheless, the non-formality of the qualifications is obscured to a small extent by the fact that the overwhelming majority (95%) of the candidates taking the tests choose to prepare themselves for the examinations by undertaking some formal training². This is because 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 the line of work in a single company is often fairly restricted. However, the preparatory training is voluntary and usually tailored to each student individually. The training package is drafted jointly by a representative from a training institute and the student, and is structured to complement the student's prior learning and work experience. Recently, the National Board of Education has introduced a widespread adult education project (AIHE) with the aim of further strengthening the role of tailored training.

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. Nearly 400 qualification titles are in place, a total of 422 educational establishments have a right to carry out examinations and almost 90,000 competence-based qualifications were acquired during the first 10 years of its operation³. The statistics for the first six months of 2003 continue to show increasing popularity; some 13,100 students obtained the qualification during the first half of the year. Table 2.1 displays the number of people who have acquired a competence-based qualification from 1995 onwards.

Table 10.1: Competence-based vocational qualifications in Finland

Year	No of vocational qualifications acquired through competence based examinations
1995	547
1996	2,645
1997	5,152
1998	8,159
1999	12,815
2000	16,903
2001	20,180
2002	23,383
Total	89,784

² Nyssölä (2002) Koulun ulkopuolella opitun tunnustaminen. National Board of Education & Ahola (2003) Validation of prior learning in Finland. Nordic Council of Ministers.

³ National Board of Education (2003) Statistics <http://www.oph.fi/page.asp?path=1.17629,18771,24250>

1.2.2 National Certificate of Language Proficiency

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. 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 had been granted a Certificate by the end of 2003⁴. 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 10.2: Number of National Certificates of Language Proficiency acquired since 1994

Year	Certificates acquired
1994	1,408
1995	1,949
1996	1,938
1997	2,188
1998	2,191
1999	2,209
2000	2,487
2001	2,275
2002	2,467
2003	2,865
Total	21,977

Source: Centre for Applied Language Studies / Jyväskylä University

1.2.3 Regulating access to formal education

The Finnish legislation permits people to apply for upper secondary schools, vocational institutes, polytechnics and universities even if they do not meet the standard entry requirements. 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 competence required for the successful completion of the qualification.

Although necessary provisions and appropriate legislative frameworks are in place, the number of students whose informal or non-formal learning is recognised as a part of an application for upper secondary schools and universities can be regarded as rather low. Universities very rarely acknowledge work experience in the selection process; work experience is only recognised when entering teaching training. The Act on Matriculation

⁴ Centre for Applied Language Studies / Jyväskylä University

Examination 1000/1994 provides school principals with an opportunity to admit people to Matriculation Examinations (*Ylioppilastutkinto*) who have not completed the necessary studies. However, it has been suggested that only a handful of cases take place per year and mostly in the case of foreign language examinations⁵.

According to the Act on Polytechnic Studies 225/1995, individuals can be accepted to polytechnics if they can demonstrate necessary competence and skills. However, in 2001 only 144 people were chosen through 'flexible student selection' that allows individuals to demonstrate their special talent or experience in the field in which they are aiming to study. In 2002, the figure was slightly higher (188 people) but it is still less than a percentage of all students⁶.

Basic vocational institutes accept a greater number of candidates than other educational institutes without standard entry qualifications. Approximately 4 per cent of people starting basic vocational education in Finland each year are chosen through the 'flexible student selection'⁶. In 2001 this included 1,698 students and in 2002 some 1,770 students entered basic vocational education despite not meeting the entry requirements⁶.

1.2.4 Accreditation

The legislative framework on upper secondary schools outlines that studies completed elsewhere, even outside of formal education systems, can, in special circumstances, be accredited. However, accreditation of informal and non-formal learning is still very limited at all educational levels. Nevertheless, development work has been initiated to broaden the scope of recognising non-formal and informal learning – polytechnics in particular have expressed their keen interest in developing this aspect⁷. The National Board of Education is in the process of adding the principles of accreditation in to the core curricula, which local educational providers will be obliged to include in their practice.

1.2.5 European Computer Driving Licence

In addition to this, the Finnish Information Technology Development Centre (TIEKE) together with education and labour administration and labour market organisations launched in 1994 a Computer Driving Licence (CDL) that has become 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 countries⁸.

⁵ Nyysölä (2002) Koulun ulkopuolella opitun tunnustaminen. National Board of Education

⁶ TAYH database

⁷ Ahola (2003) Validation of prior learning. Nordic Council of Ministers.

⁸ <http://www.ecdl.fi>

TIEKE is the managing and developing body behind the initiative. 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 lead the development work of the Licence.

1.2.6 Impact

The competence-based qualification system is by far the most established and extensive public sector scheme for validation of prior learning in Finland. The overall impact of the system on the field of vocational training has been positive⁹. It has resulted in increased consideration of labour market needs and increased co-operation between different labour and education organisations and private companies.

Validation structures are not developed to the same extent in other parts of the Finnish education system (accreditation, regulating access) although legislation already provides plenty of opportunities for further development⁷. The Ministry of Education has announced in its latest Development Plan (2003 – 2008) the commitment to take further action to create the methodology and basis for all education levels on how to accredit and validate non-formal and informal learning.

1.3 Review of existing initiatives: Private Sector

1.3.1 Industry sectors

Various labour market stakeholders are actively involved in the development of public and voluntary sector initiatives. Many industry sectors and different trade unions have a particular interest in the development of the competence-based qualification system and representatives from different professional sectors, trade unions and employer organisations are represented in the numerous Examination Boards around the country who plan and arrange the competence-based skills tests and grant the certificates. The following labour market organisations are currently involved in the organisation and development of competence-based qualifications:

- Employers' Confederation of Service Industries (PT)
- Confederation of Finnish Industry and Employers (TT)
- Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK)
- Finnish Confederation of Salaried Employees (STTK)
- Confederation of Unions for Academic Professionals in Finland (AKAVA).

Furthermore, numerous sector specific trade unions, for example, the Finnish Metalworkers' Union and the Finnish Forest Industries Federation, are represented in the Examination Committees. Altogether 21 trade unions have been involved in ALVAR - a quality assurance

⁹ Yrjölä et al. (2000) Näyttötutkintojen kokonaisarviointi. National Board of Education.

project within the area of competence-based testing and assessment. The sectors with the highest number of competence-based qualifications are technology-traffic and cultural industry sectors.

1.3.2 Individual companies

Many industries and individual companies have successfully exploited the opportunities of the competence-based education system and have established procedures to recognise skills and competences that employees acquire at work (in a formal, informal or non-formal manner). Companies particularly from the traditional manufacturing sectors have been keen on validating skills of their workforce in order to broaden their employees' skills-base and therefore provide greater flexibility and opportunity to refine their production systems according to the current economic and market trends. One of the first companies to adopt formal procedures was 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. The experience from Koskisen Oy is presented in the box below¹⁰.

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 obtain an official qualification. Currently 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 qualifications (various wood production and management qualifications). The skills are tested by an external assessor, the employer and employee representatives in practical and written skills tests after 1-2 years of work experience. The procedures have had significant individual, company and industry level impacts:

- Individual benefits (employees):
 - Improved self-confidence.
 - Broadened and improved skills-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.
 - 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
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¹⁰ Source: Interview with Esa Kallinen from Koskisen Oy.

- 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.
-

As the experience from Koskisen Oy revealed, the initiative has not only benefited the employees and the company itself but it has had a wider impact on the industry sector. Other companies have set up similar initiatives; for example, Finnair has established schemes especially in the technical and maintenance side of their business. Furthermore, Fortum Gas, which is a leading energy 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).

1.4 Review of existing initiatives: The Third Sector

Overall, many voluntary sector organisations consider the validation of non-formal and informal learning to be extremely important although only a few have official methods for validating knowledge and skills. However, three initiatives that have been implemented partly in collaboration with third sector organisations (including Youth Organisations) can be identified in Finland; these have had different levels of success:

1.4.1 Knowledge and Competence in Non-Formal Adult Education (VSOP)

VSOP is the most comprehensive unified development programme in the history of Finnish non-formal adult education. The programme provides continuing education for staff in the field of non-formal adult education aims to organise further research into non-formal education and develops methodologies and tools for making informal learning and learning within non-formal adult education visible and more recognised. One of the outputs of the project has been a pilot initiative in the field of arts & crafts. The project aims to identify validation methods for educational institutes providing handicraft courses. The project is led by the Finnish Adult Education Association and financed by the Ministry of Education.

1.4.2 Recreational Activity Study Book

One of the earliest efforts to promote the validation of non-formal learning in Finland was the establishment of Youth Academy and the *Recreational Activity Study Book* in 1994. Activity in projects, positions of trust and responsibility, courses and other recreational activities can be recorded in the study book. Recording merits and different skills in the study book is one way of validating informal and non-formal learning - once young people start their studies they may get extra points and/or get part of their studies accredited. The Academy has written flexible, agreements with some 250 educational institutions around the country including basic vocational institutes, polytechnics and faculties of education in universities¹¹. The educational institutes, however, have the freedom to make case specific decisions about learning that has been recorded in the study books. Statistical data about the impacts is limited. Over the last seven year period (1996-2003) over 70,000 young people have requested the book, of which some 11 per cent have registered with the Academy. Small scale surveys into the study book have revealed that in 2001 some 29 per cent had benefited from their informal activities in the study book. In 2003 the figure was 10 per cent⁹.

1.5 Stakeholders

1.5.1 Finnish government

The Finnish Parliament decides on education legislation and the general principles of education policy. The Government, Ministry of Education and National Board of Education are responsible for the implementation of this policy at the central administration level. Lifelong learning and validation of prior learning became a key issue in educational debates in the 1990's as the ageing of the labour force, the growing differences in education between generations as well as the increasing demand for ever higher skills all presented new challenges for education. As a result, the government is highly committed to developing lifelong learning and methods to recognise prior learning.

1.5.2 Ministry of Education

The Ministry of Education is committed to continue development work in the field of informal and non-formal learning so that they can be recognised as a valid form of learning alongside institutional education. Validation activities are a fundamental part of the national lifelong learning strategy¹². In 2002 the minister for Education also accepted a detailed plan for the recognition of prior learning in Finland – the plan consists of specific action points for development work.

The Ministry of Education determines the number, titles and other regulations of the competence-based qualifications. The decisions are, however, based on suggestions from the National Board of Education, Ministry of Labour and social partners. The Ministry of Education and the National Board of Education hold the overall responsibility for the

¹¹ Youth Academy (2004)

¹² Adult Education Council (1999) Adult Education Policy in the First Years of the 21st Century.

competence-based system but the current educational laws provide educational institutions with a considerable level of freedom. However, there is separate legislation for universities and polytechnics for which the Ministry of Education is responsible.

1.5.3 National Board of Education

The National Board of Education formally reports to the Ministry of Education. It operates as a planning and expert body and is responsible for formulating the core curricula on the basis of which comprehensive and upper secondary schools and vocational institutes draw up their own curricula. In practice, each educational institution may apply the basic rules according to local needs.

The National Board of Education is responsible for the development and implementation of the competence-based qualifications and appointing the Examination Committees. Similarly, the Board is the managing authority behind the National Certificate of Language Proficiency and responsible for appointing a nine-member Language Examination Committee.

1.5.4 The Ministry of Labour

The Ministry of Labour also acknowledges the importance of lifelong learning and validation of learning that has taken place outside of the traditional, formal education system. One of the key objectives of the National Action Plan for Employment is the recognition of prior learning as a way of improving employment in the country. The Ministry of Labour is involved in deciding the titles for the competence-based qualifications.

1.5.5 Social partners

Social partners are pivotally involved in the planning and development work of the education system and representatives are strongly represented in different councils and committees in the field of education:

- The Adult Education Council was set up by the Government to deal with matters concerning development, research and evaluation in adult education and training.
- The Training Committees operate in conjunction with the Ministry of Education. These were created to develop contacts between vocational education and the labour market.
- The Examination Committees operate under the National Board of Education and they consist of employees, employers, teachers, and trade union and employer organisation representatives. They are responsible for co-ordinating the competence-based tests with educational institutions and awarding certificates.
- The National Board of Education also appoints the Language Examination Committees. The main task of the Committee is to develop and monitor language

proficiency tests in terms of choice and content. The Committees consist of experts from the fields of language teaching, skills testing and labour markets.

- The Consultative Committees operate at vocational institutions and develop links with local working life.

1.5.6 Provincial State Offices

As previously mentioned, current education laws allow educational institutions to assess and recognise competences acquired outside of the formal education system and to credit non-formal and informal studies. It is the responsibility of the Provincial State Offices to oversee the legality of implementation at comprehensive and upper secondary schools.

1.6 Conclusions

Within the competence-based education system, the national certificate of language proficiency and computer driving licence have been successful initiatives and have become strongly rooted in the Finnish adult and vocational education culture. The competence-based qualification system has had a strong impact on validation activities and contributed to a closer co-operation between education and labour market stakeholders. Although Finland can be regarded as one of the frontrunners in this field, there is still room for development work so that the full potential of other validation mechanisms and existing legislative frameworks can be realised. For instance, knowledge, skills and competence obtained in hobbies and in other activities do not receive sufficient accreditation in formal education – accreditation of previous formal studies and work experience are considerably more common. In terms of competence-based qualifications, it has been identified that although many individual employers are fairly familiar with the system, more individual companies should possess concrete knowledge and experience of the system. It is also worth considering how validation practices could better reach young people in traditional formal education, not only in vocational education.

A great enthusiasm to further improve and unify the current validation practices can be sensed; the national authorities show a commitment to future development work. The main education and lifelong learning strategies highlight the importance of validation of informal and non-formal learning. The Finnish Committee for Lifelong Learning has stated that the competence-based system is only the beginning of a more extensive system in which people can demonstrate their skills and knowledge. The Ministry of Education has also produced an official plan for the development work, a number of different development projects have been instigated and social partners show interest in staying involved. Consequently, validation of informal and non-formal learning in Finland can be expected to further grow in importance in the future.