



How informal and non-formal learning is recognised in Europe

Finland – country report

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This country report was composed as part of a larger study on validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe. The country reports of Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Norway, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom as well as the summary of the study both in English and German, and finally the complete publication (in German only) can be found at

www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/vnfil-in-europe.

Kontakt

Dr. Martin Noack
Senior Project Manager
“Learning for Life” Programme
Phone +49 5241 81-81476
martin.noack@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Autor:
Anni Karttunen
Centre for International Mobility – CIMO, Finland

Titelbildfoto: Arne Weychardt

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The situation in Finland: The validation of informal and non-formal learning for persons with low levels of formal qualification: status quo and perspectives

1 Initial situation

In Finland validation of non-formal and informal learning procedures in vocational education and training (VET) are embedded in the education system. The official name for the VET qualification system for adults is competence-based qualifications (Näyttötutkinnot). The competence-based qualifications were first introduced in 1995. In 2007, the aspect of validation of non-formal and informal learning in the qualification system was further strengthened as the regulatory process called “personalisation” was introduced. Personalisation is a three-phase process that comprises of identification, documentation, assessment and certification. All Finnish VET qualifications are described in terms of learning outcomes and include assessment criteria. The qualification requirements are national and have a regulatory status.

The rationale, why the competence-based qualification system was implemented in the mid-90s still remains current. In a Ministry of Education report from 2004, the benefits of validation of non-formal and informal learning were examined. The report concludes that by making an individual’s competences visible, it is easier to plan and provide targeted training and the documentation of the assessment of prior learning gives the individual better opportunities to manage the challenges of a knowledge and competence society and to remain mobile in the job market. The report also estimates that recognition of prior learning can shorten the time spent studying, which saves the individual’s time, money and other resources.

Additionally the report states that better documentation of the competences provides better opportunities for working life to utilize the competences of their staff in a more appropriate manner. Staff’s hidden competences are made visible, which can increase a company’s possibilities to better compete in the marketplace.

Furthermore, the report states that from the viewpoint of the society, recognition of prior learning will increase the provisions of the investments that are directed at HRD and staff training. Recognition of prior learning can play a major role in terms of the competence needs of the future. (Ministry of Education 2004: 18)

The target group of the competence-based qualification are in most cases individuals, who are in need of a formal qualification. They may have years of work experience, but lack formal qualifications or their qualifications may be obsolete or from another sector altogether. The individuals may also be job-changers, who seek for a qualification in a new line of work, which may e.g. have better employability. It is also common that individuals working in a company that is very specialized seek only to get a part qualification (qualification module), which targets their specific task at work.

The Ministry of Culture and Education (which decides on the qualification structure, i.e. which qualifications are available and which are not in Finland, and carries out research reports and strategies on education at all levels of education) state the following in the Education and Research 2012-2016 report:

“The coming years will be marked by problems with access to labour force owing to the demographic change, changes in competence requirements and the challenge as regards the sustainability of the national economy. For society, the availability of workforce will be a problem at least in two respects. First of all, the shortage of workforce will complicate the operation of growth business and undermine the availability of welfare services in particular.” (Ministry of Education and Culture 2012: 12)

The report concludes, that:

“Access to competent workforce can be improved and the unfavourable development of the care ratio can be compensated through measures improving the efficiency of the education system and the targeting of the education and training supply. In terms of education policy, this means shortening the overall time spent in education and training and the average age at the time of qualification by means of shortening the time spent at each level of education, expediting transition phases, reducing unnecessary doubling in education and enhancing the recognition of prior learning, improving the completion rate in education, and improving the matching of education supply and labour demand.” (Ministry of Education and Culture 2012: 12)

The long history and experiences gained from the benefits of validation of non-formal and informal learning in Finland, both from the socio-economic viewpoint as well as from the viewpoint of the individual, have been but positive. Validation of non-formal and informal learning enjoys a high market value and there continues to be a strong political will to support and develop the system further.

In Finland, there is no statistics available regarding the individuals' qualification level before they decide to complete competence-based qualifications. However, it can be assumed that the number of individuals who are unemployed and seek to have their competences validated and/or gain missing skills in the competence-based qualifications system is a relatively good indicator that validation of non-formal and informal learning has positive effects on their qualification level and employability.

In 2011, according to the Finnish National Board of Education statistics, 6 300 individuals took the competence-based qualifications (full qualification) as unemployment training (i.e. financed by the Ministry of Labour), whereas 14 200 individuals took the competence-based qualifications either financed by the Ministry of Culture and Education, by their employer or by themselves. Commonly the latter target group are in employment, but wish to, e.g. gain a permanent contract with their employer or improve their employability in general.¹

¹ vipunen.csc.fi/fi-fi/ammattillinenkoulutus/tutkinnot/Pages/default.aspx (accessed 15.10.2014)

2 Vocational training and informal learning in Finland: characteristics and concepts

Vocational education and training in Finland can be divided in school based vocational training aimed at youngsters (Vocational Qualifications) vocational education and training for adults. The VET system for adults is called competence-based qualifications and it includes three different types of qualifications: 1) Vocational qualifications (same criteria as for the youngsters, but the method of completing the qualification is competence based and includes the personalisation process); 2) Further Vocational Qualifications (for skilled people with work experience); and 3) Specialist Vocational Qualifications (for people with the most demanding tasks of the field, e.g. supervisory tasks). In general, there is no prior qualification requirement for taking Further or Specialist Vocational Qualifications. Work experience is usually the entry requirement. There are a few exceptions within the regulated professions.

There are some 170 VET providers for adults in Finland. Majority of them are VET colleges (for both young and adults) owned by a municipality or joint municipalities. Some VET providers are limited companies and a few foundations and associations. Small VET providers usually concentrate in providing vocational education and training for a very specific field of qualifications (e.g. qualifications in the field of music) whereas the larger municipality colleges often provide VET in a variety of sectors, such as technology and transport, culture, natural sciences, health care, hospitality etc.

It has to be pointed out that the VET provider is not necessarily the organizer of qualifications. The organizer of qualifications is responsible for the personalisation process as a whole, but can purchase the preparatory training from another organization. But in majority of the cases the VET provider and the organizer of qualifications is the same organization. It has to be borne in mind that validation is an independent process and training is provided according to the need of the individual. At the moment there are 374 VET qualifications available. 52 are vocational upper secondary qualifications (that can be completed either as school-based or competence-based), 190 are further vocational qualifications and 132 specialist vocational qualifications. The qualifications usually give the individual an opportunity to work in range of occupations of the field in question.

All VET qualifications, regardless of how they were achieved, grant the individual a right to apply for Higher Education (Universities of Applied Sciences, Bachelor level studies). The aim of the Finnish education system is to support the idea of Lifelong Learning so that there are no “dead ends” in the education system, but all individuals have an opportunity to engage in further learning regardless of the path that they have chosen.

“Lifelong learning policy entails that transitions from one level to another and from education to the labour market are as flexible as possible. Learning does not end with a degree or qualification gained in youth but continues throughout adult life. In all education and training, attention will be paid to the recognition of prior learning so that knowledge and skills gained earlier within and outside the education system can be counted towards a qualification as fully as possible. An adult education and training system comprising all the levels of education creates a basis for responding to the competence requirements in working life and for offering high quality services for self-improvement, for instance, in liberal adult education.” (Ministry of Education and Culture 2012: 7)

Among the young age group (25-29) there are relatively big gender differences between high qualified and low qualified people. 20 percent of the men in that age group do not have any post comprehensive education (comprehensive education is a nine-year compulsory basic education, comprehensive school from the age of 7 to 16) and 23 percent have higher education, whereas 40 percent of the women in that age group have a higher education. If the entire working age population is looked at (people between 25-64 years), there were 308 000 men and 215 000 women without post comprehensive education (Finland has a population of 5,45 Million people). These groups of individuals, who do not possess any post comprehensive education qualifications are called low-qualified. Low-qualified individuals may not have any qualifications, but they may still be highly skilled.

In 1970 almost seventy-four percent of the working age population did not have any post comprehensive education, whereas by 2012 the corresponding percentage was 18,3 percent. All in all the number of people among the working aged people who are without any post comprehensive school education has sharply decreased and the number of people with either secondary or higher education increased relatively evenly since 1970 and the development has continued in the 21st century. (Kalenius and Alekski 2014: 6-8)

However, there are still over half a million working aged people in Finland, who have no qualifications. In addition to that there is an increasing number of immigrants coming to Finland, who either do not have any formal qualifications from their country of origin or the qualification requirements do not meet with the requirements of Finnish working life. Furthermore, as the working life changes rapidly, new occupations appear and the profiles of old occupations change. There are thousands of individuals, whose qualifications are obsolete and they need to update their qualifications.

In this respect, the competence-based qualifications and the validation procedures (personalisation) embedded within provide a significant, flexible and a speedy way for individuals to gain a new qualification or update the old qualification.

3 Core elements of the validation of formal and non-formal learning: status quo

3.1 Legal basis

The legislation concerning the validation of non-formal and informal learning in vocational training in Finland is extensive and detailed. The legislation clearly states that competence-based qualifications are independent of the method of acquiring the required vocational skills and completed as competence-based qualifications. In practice this implies that the individual is not required to attend any school based training in order to gain a qualification or a part qualification in case s/he either has documented proof of the required competences or s/he can demonstrate the existing competences in practical competence tests.

Table 1: Summary table of the legal basis for the validation of informal and non-formal learning

Legal title	Subject	Content relating to validation	Scope
Vocational Adult Education Act, 21 August 1998 (631/1998)	“Prescribes e.g. on the contacts to the world of work, provision of education, further education and training, students’ rights and obligations, competence-based qualifications, evaluation and assessment and funding” ²	Provision of education and arranging of qualifications <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permission to provide education and training • Qualification Committees • Issuance of qualification certificates and submission of information • Preparatory training for a competence-based qualification, personalisation and completion of qualification • Qualifications independent of the method of acquiring vocational skills • Competence-based qualifications • Deciding on qualifications and the related Qualification Requirements • Miscellaneous provisions • Informing about education and training 	National

² This and the following quotations can be found under www.minedu.fi (accessed 16.10.2014)

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fees charged for studying and qualifications 	
Vocational Education and Training Act (630/1998)	“Prescribes on the vocational upper secondary education and vocational upper secondary degrees, e.g. provision of education and training, instruction, curricula, on-the-job learning, apprenticeship training, special needs education, evaluation and assessment”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provisions regarding appeals • Provisions regarding rectification of assessments, however so that the rectification of an assessment for a competence-based qualification and a module thereof is decided on by the Qualification Committee 	National
Vocational Education and Training Decree, 6.11.1998 (812/1998)	“Prescribes on the following: studies and their scope, counselling, on-the-job learning, apprenticeship training, special needs education, assessment and evaluation.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appointment of Qualification Committees, their composition and decision making • Development of the qualification system • Contracts for arranging competence-based qualifications • Qualification certificates • Assessment of competence test performances 	National
Act and Decree on the Financing of the Provision of Education and Culture (Act 1705/2009 and Decree 1766/2009)	“The Act prescribes on the statutory government funding of education and culture. Decree on the Financing of the Provision of Education and Culture prescribes on the principles of the funding of education”	Competence-based funding of vocational further education and training was introduced as part of a legal reform. This affects the financing of preparatory training for competence-based qualifications and apprenticeship training provided by the Ministry of Education and Culture. (Finnish National Board of Education 2013)	National

Regulation on Personalisation (D:43/011/2006)	Defines a three-phased personalisation process and documentation (i.e. validation of non-formal and informal learning process)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Application for a competence-based qualification and the related preparatory training 2. Completion of the qualification 3. Acquiring the required vocational skills 4. Documentation (Finnish National Board of Education 2013)	National
Regulations (Requirements for Vocational Qualifications)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Qualification Requirements describe and determine: • Modules of the qualification • Composition of the qualification • Vocational skills required for each module • Assessment criteria (targets and criteria of assessment) • Methods of demonstrating vocational skills. (Finnish National Board of Education 2013)	National

There are two main Acts, which form the legal basis for the competence-based qualification system. Vocational Education and Training Act (630/1998) and Vocational Adult Education Act (631/1998). These Acts and the Decrees and Regulation connected to the Acts among other things outline the process of validation, provision of education and arranging the qualification, the qualification requirements, certification, financing of the system, competence requirements of the professionals, stakeholder participation, the purpose and responsibilities of the Qualification Committees and provisions to other Acts and Decrees.

As stated earlier on, the qualification requirements have a regulatory status. The same requirements apply to all competence-based qualification providers and all target groups. The qualification requirements are decided by the National Board of Education. However, the content of the requirements is developed in co-operation with multiple stakeholders and it is the role of the working life and labour organisations to prepare proposals in order to develop the competence-based Qualification system and participate in preparing the qualification requirements. (Finish National Board of Education 2013: 19)

The scope of competence-based qualifications is to make an individual's existing competences visible and have them formally recognized and certified regardless of the learning context. The legislative framework, including policies and guidance documents fully supports validation of non-formal and informal learning and the competence-based qualification system. Strong national legal basis promotes the sustainability and high market value of the validation system in Finland.

3.2 Procedures and instruments

Qualifications in vocational adult education and training are completed as competence-based qualifications. The competence-based qualifications system was established in 1994. The system has been developed in close cooperation between educational authorities, vocational education and training professionals and social partners mainly from trade unions and other labour organisations. The aim of competence-based qualifications is to obtain a formal qualification certificate of completion of a vocational upper secondary qualification, further vocational qualification or specialist vocational qualification or a certificate of a completed qualification module. The organizer of a competence-based qualification is responsible for the permanent retention of copies of signed qualification certificates. These procedures are binding. In labour market training, the regional employment authorities may carry out non-binding identification procedures. According to their initial evaluation of the need for a competence-based qualification, the employment authorities may purchase the competence-based qualifications from the qualification organizers, in which case the procedure is the same for the unemployed as for the employed.

Competence-based qualifications include further vocational qualifications (*ammattitutkinto*), which demonstrate the vocational skills required of skilled workers, and specialist vocational qualifications (*erikoisammattitutkinto*), which demonstrate competences of the most demanding tasks in the field. There are no prior qualification requirements to complete further or specialist vocational qualifications. In addition to these, vocational qualifications (*amatillinen perustutkinto*) can also be completed as competence-based qualifications. Vocational qualifications carried out in the form of competence-based qualifications equal to the qualifications studied in school-based vocational upper secondary education and training for the youngsters.

Candidates seeking validation may provide documented proof of their competences. The documents can include certificates of formal and non-formal training, work certificates or any documentation that has the capacity to confirm the candidate's competences. The documents are presented to the Qualification Committee for approval. Qualification Committees are statutory bodies and appointed by the Finnish National Board of Education. The committees are responsible for one or more field specific qualifications and they operate nationwide. The maximum number of member in each committee is nine and they represent employers, employees and teachers. In some fields it is seen necessary to include self-employed professionals. At the moment there are 147 Qualification Committees. The committees are appointed for three years at a time. The members perform the committee duty temporarily alongside their regular duties.

In case the documented proof does not fully satisfy the Qualification Committee (e.g. they cannot evaluate whether the competences match the qualification requirements based on the documented proof), or if the candidate has no documented proof of his/her competences, the candidate may take competence tests to demonstrate their competences.

The Qualification Committees supervise and make contracts for organizing competence-based qualifications with the qualification providers. They also issue certification. They are responsible for the recognition of prior learning. (The Finnish National Board of Education 2013: 21-22)

All adults, who are seeking to get a competence-based qualification, demonstrate their vocational skills and competences in competence tests and through documented proof. It is irrelevant how and where they have acquired them. Competence tests are carried out in authentic work situations and environments in companies. Even though taking part in competence tests does not require formal training, majority of participants participate in some preparatory training to rectify gaps in their vocational skills and to improve them. Preparatory training for a competence-based qualification Training is arranged as contact teaching, distance learning and multiform learning or apprenticeship training, during which the candidate acquires sufficient skills for passing competence tests related to a competence-based qualification or module thereof. Only ca. five percent of the candidates complete the qualification without any preparatory training. The students participating in preparatory training are tailored with individual learning programs depending on their learning needs. The aim is that the students are able to meet with the qualification requirements. This process is called personalisation (cf. validation), and will be described in the following chapter.

3.2.1 Personalisation

Every individual goes through a three-phase personalisation process. Personalisation in the competence-based qualifications equals the validation process including identification, documentation, assessment and certification. Personalisation is regulated by a Regulation on Personalisation.

“The competence-based qualification system is intended to offer adults flexible arrangements and the best possible preconditions for demonstrating skills in attaining competence-based qualifications and for developing and updating vocational skills required in working life.

Personalisation refers to customer-oriented planning and implementation of guidance, advisory and support measures for a student engaged in preparatory training for a competence-based qualification and a candidate attaining a competence-based qualification.

Personalisation is divided into three phases:

1. application for a competence-based qualification and the related preparatory training
2. completion of the qualification or a module of a qualification (part qualification)
3. acquisition of the required vocational skills.

Personalisation is a process in which the three phases are clearly connected. Personalisation must be documented in a related document.” (Finish National Board of Education 2013: 33) The phases including documentation will be explained in more detail in the following.

3.2.1.1 Application for a competence-based qualification

When the individual applies for competence-based qualifications, the organizer of qualifications (In most cases the organizer is a VET college or other educational institution providing VET qualifications and training related to that) must arrange the procedures for identification of the existing competences of the individual. It is the organizer's task to determine the suitability of the candidate for a qualification (or a qualification module, part qualification) and provide information, support and guidance throughout the process. In case the candidate is deemed unsuitable for a certain qualification, the candidate must be guided to a more suitable qualification or another field of study.

In the application phase, the pre-assessment of competences must be carried out through various methods that are deemed to be the most suitable to the qualification in question. As the candidate's competences have been identified, it must be assessed whether the individual can be guided directly to competence tests or if further learning is needed to acquire the vocational skills required in the qualification requirements in question. In this phase it is also assessed whether the documentation presented by the candidate can be proposed for validation (Finnish National Board of Education 2013: 33-34). This phase equals identification in the Council Recommendation of 12/12.

3.2.1.2 Completing the qualification

In the completion phase the candidate together with support of the organizer of the qualification, prepare an individual plan. The plan describes how, where and when the candidate is going to demonstrate his/her competences stated in the qualification requirements. Additionally the plan indicates the assessors of the competence tests. It is required in the Finnish competence-based qualification system that the assessment is carried out in tripartite co-operation. The team of assessors must have employer and employee representation as well as one certified assessor (Specialist in competence-based qualifications, usually a teacher / trainer from a VET college). The assessors are appointed and trained by the qualification organizer (e.g. VET college). The assessors make a proposal for granting a qualification to the Qualification Committee (the external statutory body) that issues the qualification certificate. In case there is no sufficient evidence with regards to the qualification requirements or the validation process is not carried out according to regulations, the Qualification Committee may ask for additional information or clarifications.

The qualification requirements are modular and the individual plan for demonstrating one's competences is prepared module by module and amended if necessary. All amendments in the plan are to be approved, signed and dated by both parties, the candidate and the representative of the organizer of the qualification in question.

In the completion phase, the assessors also determine how well the candidate's documented and previously demonstrated competences comply to the qualification requirements and the assessors submit the document(s) to the Qualification Committee for validation. In case the candidate has previously completed a qualification or a qualification module, the results must also be submitted for validation. If there appears to be a need to confirm that all the candidates' competences are up to date, steps may be taken to confirm them. This may include requests for further documentation or demonstrating one's competences in a practical competence test. Recognition of any prior learning is decided by the Qualification Committee (Finnish National Board of Education 2013: 35).

Recognition of prior learning (whether formal, informal or non-formal) results in certification. In completion of the entire qualification, the candidate receives a qualification certificate. In case the candidate completes one or more modules of a qualification (part qualification), a certificate is awarded for module(s) on request. In case the individual wishes later on to gain a full qualification s/he may complete the remaining modules without having to re-take the assessment procedures for the already completed modules. This phase equals assessment and certification in the Council Recommendation 12/12.

3.2.1.3 Acquisition of the required vocational skills

In case further learning is required, in the third phase of personalization the organizer of qualifications must identify the candidate's learning needs, needs for the most suitable learning environments (on-the-job learning, distance learning, school based learning etc.). This stage may not be necessary in case the candidate is evaluated to have enough competences. In this case Completing the qualification -phase is the final step for the candidate.

The Acquisition phase takes the candidate's personal situation, competences and possible special needs into account.

The aim of the Acquisition phase is to get the student familiar with him/herself as a learner and provide new learning strategies. The aim is also to provide support and guidance for the student in terms of suitable learning paths and if necessary to provide guidance towards support services of other experts.

The training provider is obliged to plan learning opportunities to the candidate that comply and support the acquisition of the qualification requirements. (Finnish National Board of Education 2013: 36)

3.2.1.4 Documentation

All of the above phases must be documented according to the Regulation on Personalisation (Finnish National Board of Education 2013). The candidate and the qualification provider and/or education provider must approve and sign the document and any amendments.

In terms of preparatory training of special needs students, the needs must be identified during the application phase. The special needs are to be recorded in the personalisation documentation and an individual education plan must be appended to the documentation. The documents describe planned and/or implemented special support and guidance and other personalisation arrangements required by the candidate. (Finnish National Board of Education 2013: 38)

3.2.2 Evaluation and relevance for the target group

Competence-based qualifications for adults are an established part of the education system. The number of candidates has constantly increased over the years. In 2012 the Qualification Committees awarded 34 144 competence-based qualification certificates. In 2010 the number of awarded certificates was 33 123 and 32 344 certificates were awarded in 2008 respectively. For reference, the number of school-based vocational qualifications in 2012 for youngsters was 36 500. In addition to the full qualification certificates in 2012 over 23 000 part qualifications certificates were awarded.³

The figures above reflect the fact that the competence-based qualifications are well-known and they grow more and more popular each year. The reasons for such wide awareness of the system are multiple. On the one hand, there is plenty of information and advice available from different sources. The organizers of the qualifications have a responsibility to inform about the qualifications that they provide; the local employment offices co-operate with the qualification providers and advice their clients; the labour organizations provide information to their members and; on a national level, the educational authorities provide information nationally.

The system is very transparent; it includes all the four stages of validation implied in the Council Recommendation of 12/2012. All information of the system and of the qualification requirements is available to all free of charge on the internet. There are many websites that provide information on the available qualifications, organizers of qualifications, training providers, financing and certification. The information is commonly available in Finnish, Swedish and English. There is also a self-assessment tool, with which anybody can familiarize themselves with the qualification requirements or a qualification module and assess their own competences: www.osaan.fi (in Finnish), www.jagkan.fi (in Swedish).

There is a wide acceptance of the system from all parties involved. Competence-based qualifications confer eligibility to higher education. Working life is strongly involved in the development of the qualification system as well as the validation and training procedures. There is a wide political consensus based on the long Finnish experience of the socio-economic benefits of recognition of prior learning.

“Lifelong learning means learning throughout the lifespan and in all walks of life. For the principle of lifelong learning to be realised, it is vital that knowledge and competencies are made visible and knowledge and skills are valued to the full wherever, whenever and however they have been acquired. When done correctly, the identification and recognition of prior learning will make for a well-working education and qualification system and improve the motivation and progress of the individual in education and in working life. Educational legislation already provides for the validation of non-formal learning.” (Ministry of Education and Culture 2012: 15)

As mentioned earlier on, the individuals, who seek competence-based qualifications either have no qualifications (but e.g. work experience or competences gained in other contexts), have obsolete qualifications, need to upgraded their qualifications or have a qualification e.g. in a field with high unemployment or they cannot work on that field any longer (e.g. health reasons). Competence based qualifications give the individual an opportunity to gain a qualification faster than via a traditional school-based education and double-learning is avoided through validation. However, most people

³ www.stat.fi (accessed 3.10.2014)

attend some preparatory training according to their individual study plan. This gives the individuals an opportunity to gain new competences or update existing competences in a flexible manner.

In Finland, there are no employment agreements that would indicate an automatic rise in salaries for individuals with qualification. Some research has been carried out in order to see, whether gaining a qualification leads to higher salary, but the results were speculative and the rising trend in salaries for the qualified people may result from various factors, such as economic trends etc. The main reasons, why individuals seek competence-based qualifications, are improved employment opportunities, better chance of keeping one's existing job or better options for getting a promotion and self-development.

The low-qualified individuals have decreased opportunities in using their competences to the full extent in working life. Often people with low or no qualifications end up in sales, cleaning, and the hotel and catering industry or farm work. However, they are the most likely employees to be laid off in case there is an economic downswing. It is also the low-qualified individuals, who are the most difficult target group to activate in order to seek employment or further training. In this sense the competence-based qualifications are an attractive option for the low-qualified, since flexible, individual plans are compiled for everybody.

3.3 Financial structures

“The aim [of financing in Vocational Education and Training] is to provide better support to the education and training of the whole age group, to improve completion rates, more rapid transition to working life, and the recognition of prior learning.” (Ministry of Education and Culture 2012: 40)

Laws regulate the financing of the competence-based qualifications. In Finland, there is a long tradition of free training. State funding is available also for the competence-based qualifications and preparatory training for the qualifications. The Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Labour provide for most of the funding for arranging competence-based qualifications and preparatory training depending on the target group. The Ministry of Labour allocates money regionally for the unemployed and the Ministry of Culture and Education allocates money to the qualification organizers for validation and preparatory training for people who are in employment, but seek competence-based qualifications.

The Ministry of Education introduced a performance-based financing in 2010 concerning the Further and Specialist Vocational Qualifications. The providers receive maximum three percent of the government basic funding for the qualifications attained. Apprenticeship training can also be carried out in the form of competence-based qualifications. In apprenticeship training the state funding is slightly less due to the fact that 80 percent of the training takes place in a company or other work organization. In case the candidate is employed and seeks to complete a competence-based qualification or a qualification module, a small tuition fee may be collected. The fees must be agreed upon with the Qualification Committee. Also, the employers finance competence-based qualifications or qualification modules for their employees. All candidates, however, must pay a qualification fee, which is €58 since 2012. The qualification fee covers some of the costs of the Qualification Committees. (Finnish National Board of Education 2013: 15-16)

The individuals seeking to gain a qualification and are not in employment may be eligible to different state benefits. The biggest target group is immigrants. The unemployed also have a possibility to receive unemployment benefits and study for a qualification at the same time. (CIMO 2012)

3.4 Institutionalisation

3.4.1 Roles and responsibilities of stakeholders

As stated earlier on, the validation of non-formal and informal learning in competence-based qualifications is well regulated and the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders are defined in detail.

The Ministry of Education and Culture decides on the qualification structure, i.e. which qualifications are to be offered nationally. It provides financing for arranging the qualifications. It finances the training providers and qualification organizers and the target group is mainly individuals, who are in employment, but are seeking to gain a qualification. The Ministry prepares and issues provisions in relation to competence-based qualifications and sets the qualification fee.

The Ministry of Employment and the Economy provides financing for arranging competence-based qualifications and manages the regional Centres of Economic Development, Transport and the Environment. They in turn grant government transfers to training providers for working life development and services. Their target group is the unemployed or individuals under threat of unemployment as well as immigrants.

The Finnish National Board of Education decide on the qualification requirements, set the requirements for certifications and steer the preparation work of qualification structure proposals in cooperation with working life and training providers. They appoint the Qualification Committees and assist them in evaluating the preconditions for arranging competence-based qualifications.

Qualification Committees are external bodies that supervise the competence-based qualifications-system and agree upon their organization. The committees award the qualification certification and act as the appeals body for the system. Their role also is to prepare and propose suggestions for further development of the competence-based qualifications. Qualification Committees play a major role in quality assurance of the competence-based qualifications and the recognition of prior learning.

The role of working life (i.e. companies and other work organizations) and labour organisations is to prepare proposals for developing qualifications and the qualification system including the qualification requirements of competence-based qualifications. They participate in the practical arrangements of competence-based qualifications providing expertise as assessors, providing suitable assessment environments for the candidates and providing suitable on-the-job learning opportunities for the candidates. Working life representation is also required in the Qualification Committees as well as the National Education and Training Committees. National Education and Training Committees are an expert body in vocational education and training, appointed by the Ministry of Education and Culture to monitor, to assess and predict the development of education and training and skills and competencies required in working life.

Organizers of competence-based qualifications (usually VET providers, ca. 170 altogether), are required to have a contract for arranging qualifications with the Qualification Committee. The contract includes a detailed plan of the qualification arrangements, including the personalization process and the list of involved stakeholders. The organizers plan, arrange and assess the competence tests in co-operation with working life representatives (employer and employee representatives) and they provide information, guidance and advice related to the attainment of competence-based qualifications. The organizers are responsible for the recruitment and training of the work life assessors, they sign qualification certificates for their part and are responsible for the documentation related to assessment as well as providing statistical information. (Finnish National Board of Education 2013: 18-20). Work life assessors are employers and employees from companies, whose role is to assess the competences of the candidates. The work life assessors are trained by the qualification organization, e.g. a VET college.

3.4.2 Specialists in competence-based qualifications

In the Finnish competence-based qualification -system at least one of the assessors is required to have the Diploma of a Specialist in competence-based qualifications. The purpose of the training programme is to promote organizing competence-based qualifications in a flexible and trustworthy manner that takes the requirements of working life into consideration and is customer-friendly. The specialists' role is to monitor the quality of the qualification process. Now there are ca 13.000 Specialists in competence-based qualifications trained in Finland. Each year some 800 new specialists are trained.

The training program is 25 ECTS and its professional requirements are formed of three separate units that are described in terms of learning outcomes. 1) Planning of organizing competence-based qualifications, 2) Organizing competence-based qualifications according to personalization requirements, 3) Quality assurance in competence-based qualifications (Opetushallitus 2012).

The training programme is available in six vocational teacher training colleges in Finland.

3.4.3 Quality assurance

Competence-based qualifications have multiple quality assurance mechanisms in place. One of the most important quality assurance features are the national qualification requirements that are described in learning outcomes and include assessment criteria. The requirements are regularly reviewed and amended according to the needs of working life. The learning outcome based qualification requirements provide transparency to the process of validation as well as the candidate. It is considered that learning outcome -based systems only can produce reliable results in validation of non-formal and informal learning.

“Recognising knowledge acquired in different ways also entails competence-based definition of qualification requirements. It is only when the target learning is sufficiently well defined that the individual’s learning can be assessed in relation to it.” (Ministry of Education 2012: 15)

Secondly, there is a well-defined regulatory framework that places the individual in the center of the process (cf. personalisation in the competence-based qualifications) and other policy and guidance documents that steer the system. In addition to quality, it provides sustainability and transparency to the system.

Thirdly, public financing for the system exists. This also promotes sustainability and thus allows long-term development. Public financing ensures access to the system regardless of the socio-economic status of the candidate.

Fourthly, mandatory and continuous competence development of the professionals is in place. The qualified assessors, Specialists in competence-based qualifications, are trained to monitor the quality of the qualification process. The work life assessors are required to have assessor training provided by the organizer of qualifications. Furthermore, there is systematic further training available for Specialists in competence-based qualifications, as the procedures, legislation and practices change over time.

Fifthly, tripartite co-operation between employers, employees and teachers in all stages of the process ensures that the requirements of working life are taken into consideration, the assessment procedure

Sixthly, multiple assessment methods are used, there are standardized competence tests available. The assessors must represent employers, employees and teachers to maintain impartiality of the assessment results. In case the assessment results differ from assessor to assessor, they must find a consensus and make the decision in favour of the candidate.

Seventhly, appeals systems and right for guidance are in place that ensure the rights of the individual. In case the candidate feels that the assessment has been unfair, unprofessional or that the assessment result has not reflected his/her real competences, the candidate may appeal of the assessment result and have it reviewed. All candidates must be duly informed about the assessment procedure prior to the start of the process. Guidance has a central role in the competence-based qualification –system. The three-phase personalisation entails guidance in all phases of the process.

Eighthly, organising competence-based qualifications must be done under contract with the Qualification Committee. No institution is allowed to act as a qualification organizer without a contract.

Ninthly, there is an external statutory body, the Qualification Committees, to monitor the quality of the competence-based qualifications. The Committees perform external audits especially to new organizers in order to advise and help them provide high quality qualification procedures.

Tenthly, there are extensive statistics and follow-up procedures for monitoring the development of the competence-based qualifications –system. The collection of statistics is organized on a national level and is mandatory to the organizers of qualifications as well as to the Qualification Committees.

3.5 Support structures

3.5.1 Guidance and counselling

In Finland the aim is that adult students receive personalized and customer oriented guidance and counselling services, teaching arrangements and other support measures. Guidance and counselling aims to take special circumstances into consideration. Such circumstance may be dyslexia, dysgraphia, and different cultural and/or linguistic background. In competence-based qualifications the three-phased personalisation applies guidance and counselling throughout the process. (CIMO 2012)

The organizers of competence-based qualifications have a responsibility to provide information and guidance to the candidates as follows. “In accordance with the contract for arranging competence-based qualifications, the organizer of the qualifications ensures that information and guidance are provided on the completion of the qualification in question, taking account of local and nationwide competence requirements in working life and the potential number of candidates completing a competence-based qualification. Individuals interested in completing a competence-based qualification and those applying to become candidates for doing so must also be provided with expert guidance when applying for a competence-based qualification and the related preparatory training.” (The Finnish National Board of Education 2013: 49)

In the plan for arranging competence-based qualifications, the organizers of qualifications should consider the following aspects of guidance:

Organizers have to describe their resources for guidance activities and ascertain how guidance and advice will be provided to candidates in applying for a competence-based qualification and the related preparatory training, and in completing the competence-based qualification. They will also need to describe the forms of guidance (e.g. group guidance, individual guidance and on-line guidance) they will use. The plan must indicate the time allocated for providing guidance and advice and the level of competence of the persons providing the guidance. (The Finnish National Board of Education 2013: 53)

3.5.2 Competences of guidance counsellors

Working as a guidance counsellor in a school/educational institution in Finland requires a teacher's qualification supplemented by one of the following professional qualifications.

Most of the Finnish career practitioners have obtained their certificate within a work-based programme (60 ECTS). All of the programmes use a blended learning approach.

There are also two Master degree programmes available. The other programme provides a Master degree (180+120=300 ECTS), where students can have their major in either education, educational sociology or adult education. The pedagogical studies required for qualification as a teacher are also included in the training programme. The other programme is a two-year Master programme (120 ECTS) in guidance for those who already have a Bachelor degree in Education.

The above guidance counsellor training programmes have developed competence-based curricula. The training units cooperate in curriculum development and the following processes are embedded in both training programmes:

- Awareness of the society, educational system and the labour market
- Life span in societal and cultural contexts
- Theories in education, educational psychology, sociology and philosophy
- Theories in counselling
- Research in the field of counselling, promoting practice & research
- Counselling in practice, meeting the clients
- The work of a teacher
- Cross-sectoral networks in guidance and counselling⁴

3.5.3 Marketing and information

In the guidelines for competence-based qualifications, marketing and information is the responsibility of the organizer of qualifications. It is in the interests of the organizers to market the qualifications effectively. The requirement for the organizers is that they cannot market the preparatory training solely, but they must describe the validation procedure in the marketing material as well. Majority of the organizers of competence-based qualifications are vocational colleges and they provide face-to-face information, advice and counselling. The network of organizers covers the entire country.

For the unemployed, there is advice and information available about the competence-based qualifications in the employment offices. Often the regional employment authorities buy the validation and preparatory training services from the local organizers.

Labour unions and associations market the competence-based qualifications effectively on their websites and they provide advice and information to their members.

There are nationally managed websites for end users, the candidates, which provide accurate information on the qualifications and describe the validation procedures. There are also interactive services available on the web, where interested persons can ask questions regarding qualifications and the procedures and experts provide answers online.

⁴ www.cimo.fi (accessed 26.9.2014)

3.5.4 Internet research results

Three web searches were carried out. In the first web search, the search word was “näyttötutkinnot” (competence-based qualifications). That search resulted ca. 45 000 hits. The quality of the hits was relevant from the viewpoint of the candidate searching for information. Majority of the websites were the organizers’ websites, describing what competence-based qualifications are available in their institution and how the qualifications can be taken. Secondly, the national information websites on competence-based qualifications were on top of the listing, providing relevant and unbiased information on the system. Thirdly, labour unions- and associations’ websites reached the top results as well, promoting the qualification system and providing information to their members. The fourth category was paid commercials that were marketing the competence-based qualifications that their organization organized.

The second search word was “aiemmin opitun tunnustaminen ja tunnustaminen” (identification and recognition of prior learning). There were 15 400 hits. Majority of the results were guides, reports, projects or websites of educational authorities directed at practitioners. None of the results would have been very useful for a candidate searching for possibilities for validation.

The third search word was “osaamisen tunnustaminen” (recognition of competences). This combination resulted to over 120 000 hits, but the results were similar to the previous search. Many of the links were home pages of higher education institutions, describing validation principles in general in higher education or their own organization.

Competence-based qualifications as a concept is well-known in Finland and there is plenty of useful information available on the internet for the candidates as to what, where, when and how. Most of the organizers of competence-based qualifications have printed flyers that are available at the info desks of the organizing institutions, regional public authorities, guidance centres and employment offices. Organizers also place ads in newspapers promoting the qualifications and the opportunities for validation.

Education policy positions on the validation of informally acquired competences

In Finland there is a common consensus regarding the importance of validation of non-formal and informal learning. The Competence Based Qualifications -system celebrates its twentieth anniversary in 2014. Despite the long history of the system, the development of Competence Based Qualifications -system has been a very dynamic one. The Qualification Requirements are updated on a regular basis depending on the needs of the working life; new regulations have been added to strengthen the centrality of the individual in the validation process (Regulation on Personalisation); the national guidelines are renewed every few years to provide proper guidance in the changing circumstances to the practitioners; qualified assessors and guidance counsellors are being trained continuously.

Finland has readily adopted the European policies and tools regarding validation of non-formal and informal learning and incorporated them in the Competence Based Qualifications -system. Finland was amongst the first countries in Europe to start systematically testing ECVET (already in 2006). The Finnish National Qualification Framework (NQF) is strongly linked with validation and embraces the notion not only in VET, but in all other sectors of education. This is promoting a common language and continuous learning paths for different education providers from Liberal Adult Education to VET and to Higher Education as well as working life.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is also linked to other national policies and strategies than educational ones. The Lifelong Guidance Strategy also embraces validation of non-formal and informal learning, and there is a strong linkage between national guidance systems and validation. (Ministry of Education and Culture 2012)

The roles of different stakeholders in the Competence Based Qualifications are clearly defined and the stakeholders, including working life, have a similar view on the objectives of the system. This promotes the high market value of the Competence Based Qualifications and enhances trust between the actors.

In Finland, validation of non-formal and informal learning in VET is an established way of operation and forms the core of the entire qualification system. Other educational sectors are following along the same lines of development.

4 Summary and prospects

Validation of competences in the process of guidance requires competence development for both professional guidance counsellors and other people engaged in guidance activities. Certification is often seen as the only aim of the validation procedure. In this case we are missing the true potential of recognition as a starting point for goal setting, learning and career planning. Identification and mapping of knowledge, skills and competences is a dialogue between the customer and the counsellor that aims at professional and personal development. (Ministry of Education and Culture 2012) Even though in the competence-based qualification system guidance is seen as an integral part of the process, it is not adequately defined, what the guidance should entail, what the aim of guidance in the validation process should be, what the competences of the guidance providers in validation should be. From time to time, the qualification system appears to be mechanistic and focus on the recognition and certification process instead of individual and professional development.

The competence-based qualifications are established and well known, there is a myriad of quality assurance mechanisms in place and the system is flexible and it takes individual needs into account. The system is transparent and sustainable. It has upgraded the competence level of hundreds of thousands of Finns and provided better-qualified and skilled workforce to the labour market. The system and the qualification requirements are under constant revision, which responds to the needs of the working life. The whole qualification system from planning to execution is carried out in co-operation with working life and other relevant stakeholders.

For any validation system to gain trust and high market value from all stakeholders, there should be proper legislation and policies, quality assurance mechanisms in place, constant competence development of professionals and sustainable co-operation structures with working life and other relevant stakeholders.

5 Case studies: Practical consequences of the core elements

Kira

Kira (30) has two children (14 and 9 years old), she has completed the 9-year compulsory education, but has not had any further education or training because she was busy looking after her children. She has always done temporary work (as a temporary cleaner in different medical practices and as a care worker in a nursing home amongst others).

She received workplace induction training for these jobs, but no recognised form of professional qualification. Kira lives in a rural community in a district in Eastern Finland. The nearest large town (85,000 inhabitants) is approximately an hour away on public transport and there is a lack of nearby education opportunities and resources. Kira would have liked to train in the past. However, this would have been incompatible with childcare and difficult due to the long working hours and commuting time involved.

Legal basis

In Finland Kira has a statutory right to have her previously acquired skills and competences validated in the competence-based qualifications -system. When she enrolls as a student in a VET college (or any other institution that organizes qualifications), she will automatically go through a personalisation process, in which her prior learning is identified, documented, assessed and certified in case she meets with the qualification requirements. She is also entitled to participate preparatory training for those competence areas that are deemed not to suffice to complete the qualification.

Process

Kira is once again unemployed and she goes to the local employment centre. She discusses the possibilities for qualifying when on unemployment benefit. The advisor in the employment centre thought it was a good idea. The advisor found out that in the local VET college arranged a Further Qualification for Institutional Cleaner. It was estimated that Kira would benefit from having a formal qualification and that there were plenty of job opportunities in the area. After a while, she received a letter from the employment office that she is able to start the qualification process whilst on unemployment benefit.

Financing

Kira will get her usual unemployment benefit and an additional nine euros per day for travel from home to the college and back, and for other possible expenses. The maximum time she can use the benefit for gaining a qualification is 24 months.

Support

Together with a vocational teacher and a guidance counsellor the validation of non-formal and informal learning process starts. The guidance and counselling needs were canvassed in one-to-one discussions, in learning ability tests and self-assessments. In the beginning of the process all the necessary documentation (work certificates, school certificates etc.) was collected and Kira started to compile her competence portfolio. It was assessed that she had some further learning to do to fulfil the qualification requirements. All of the missing competences were of such nature that it was decided that Kira would best learn and gain the competences by on-the-job-learning. She was allocated an on-the-job-learning position in a company for 4 months, where she was assigned a tutor, who made sure that she had the opportunity to learn and gain the missing competences. Actual

schooling was not needed in this case at all. During this period she took the competence test according to the individualized plan and according to her own development. After the on-the-job-learning period in the company was over, she had taken all the required parts of the qualification in competence test and was a proud owner of a diploma for Further Qualification in Institutional Cleaning.

Bastian

Bastian (29) lives in a small town in the South of Finland. He finished the compulsory education, moved on to general upper secondary school and finished his matriculation exams. He then began training to be a nurse, but dropped out after a year.

After breaking off his professional training, Bastian managed to get a job in IT. He has gained four years' professional experience in a large industry company where he was responsible for network management and coordination of IT services.

Following job cuts and outsourcing of IT services, Bastian initially worked under an external service provider with a 12 month fixed-term employment contract. After this contract expired, he received no further offer of employment and has now been unemployed for the past five months.

Bastian has acquired expertise and experience in managing a small team and in network management thanks to working in this field for nearly 5 years. However, he has no formal proof of these skills apart from his employer reference.

Legal basis

In Finland Bastian has a statutory right to have his previously acquired skills and competences validated in the competence-based qualifications -system. When he enrolls as a student in a VET college (or any other institution that organizes qualifications), he will automatically go through a personalisation process, in which his prior learning is identified, documented, assessed and certified in case he meets with the qualification requirements. He is also entitled to participate preparatory training for those competence areas that are deemed not to suffice to complete the qualification

Process

Bastian is unemployed and he goes to the local employment centre. He discusses the possibilities for taking a competence-based qualification in the IT-sector when on unemployment benefit. The advisor in the employment centre and Bastian discussed whether it would be better for his employability to resume to his nurse studies. However, Bastian said that he has no work experience in the field and has no economic opportunities to carry out full time studies for many years. The advisor found out that the local VET College arranged a Specialist Qualification for Information and Communications Technology, which would be suitable as Bastian had quite extensive work experience, including managerial experience in the field. It was estimated that Bastian would benefit from having a formal qualification and that there were some of job opportunities in the area. After a while, he received a letter from the employment office that he is able to start the qualification process whilst on unemployment benefit.

Financing

Bastian receives his normal unemployment benefits for 24 months and 9 euros for any transportation or any other expenses.

Support

Together with a vocational teacher and a guidance counsellor the validation of non-formal and informal learning process starts.

The guidance and counselling needs were canvassed in one-to-one discussions, in learning ability tests and self-assessments. In the beginning of the process all the necessary documentation (work certificates, school certificates etc.) was collected and Bastian started to compile her competence portfolio. It was assessed that he should have all the necessary competences to meet with the qualification requirements, so no preparatory training was required.

Bastian was guided directly to make a competence test plan (where, how and when he could demonstrate his competences) and take the competence tests in an authentic working environment in a company that was co-operating with the VET college. Bastian was able to demonstrate his competences and fulfilled the qualification requirements.

The documentation and a proposal for a qualification were sent to the Qualification Committee and Bastian had his qualification in less than three months after his visit to the employment center.

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Address | Contact

Bertelsmann Stiftung
Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256
33311 Gütersloh | Germany
Phone +49 5241 81-0
Fax +49 5241 81-81999

Frank Frick
Program Learning for life
Phone +49 5241 81-81253
Fax +49 5241 81-681253
frank.frick@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Dr. Martin Noack
Program Learning for life
Phone +49 5241 81-81476
Fax +49 5241 81-681476
martin.noack@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Martina Schwenk
Program Learning for life
Phone +49 5241 81-81174
Fax +49 5241 81-681174
martina.schwenk@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de