

Validation of NFIL: Finnish experience and trade union practices
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OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION: THE LONG EXPERIENCE OF FINLAND IN VALIDATION OF NFIL	4
1. THE SYSTEM OF VALIDATION AND THE INVOLVEMENT OF TRADE UNIONS	4
1.1. The CBQ system: a central role for validation in Finland	4
1.2. The role of social partners in the institutional architecture of validation of NFIL	5
1.3. The involvement of trade unions of Employees in experiences promoting validation: the example of SAK in the Noste and Osaava Pärjää programs	6
1.4. The employer side: the experience of EK (Finnish construction Trade Union)	7
1.4.1. The activity of the union	7
1.4.2. The Oivallus Project: “What kind of education would prepare for work in the 2020’s	8
2. TRADE UNIONS AND TRAINING SYSTEM: EXAMPLE FROM THREE FINNISH EDUCATION CENTRES	8
2.1. TSL in Helsinki: non formal learning, notably for Trade Union staff.	8
2.1.1. The activity of the centre	8
2.1.2. The particular exemple of the ‘developing people’s skills and competences’ project	9
2.2. The ‘Siikaranta-opisto’ training centre of Espoo: vocational education and general education.	9
2.3. TAKK, one of the leading (vocational) adult education centres in Finland	10
3. QUESTIONING THE IMPACT OF THE SYSTEM OF VALIDATION: DIAGNOSIS AND PROPOSITIONS OF ACTORS OF THE SYSTEM TO MAKE IT TO EVOLVE	11
3.1. Qualify the results of the system in terms of training and validation of NFIL: rather good quantitative results hide somewhat disappointing effects?	11
3.1.1. Some disappointing results in terms of training and validation of NFIL?	11
3.1.2. About the targeted populations of the process of validation	12
3.2. Limits and difficulties of the current system	12
3.3. Some proposals to make the system to evolve	13
CONCLUSION: A MATURE SYSTEM OF VALIDATION, BUT THAT COULD EVOLVE	14
APPENDIX: MEETINGS	15
APPENDIX: DOCUMENTS	16

Validation of NFIL: Finnish experience and trade union practices

Introduction: the long experience of Finland in validation of NFIL

Finland has a very long interest in Education and Training, and a long experience of validation of non-formal and non-formal learning (NFIL). The ideas of consensus and social dialogue are very important, as well as education, for the foundations of the Finnish society. The tripartite cooperation in training and training assessment exists since the 1960's. Education is something which is seen as necessary to stay competitive in a globalized economy. The validation of learning in Finland mainly occurs inside the CBQ system (adult education), even if some initiatives outside this specific framework may also take place. For instance, there exists some experiences lead by the 'Polytechnics'¹ ('Universities of Applied Sciences'). Whatever the process used for validation, at the core of the system is the principle of "recognition of prior learning". A national qualification network, based on the 8-level European Qualification Framework (EQF), was expected to enter into force in 2011. It has not been yet accepted at the Parliament level².

This document firstly presents the Finnish system of validation and the involvement of trade unions (section 1). Then, the activity linked to training and validation of three education centres is exposed (section 2). Finally, the impacts of the validation system, and the possible evolutions of this system, are questioned (section 3).

1. The system of validation and the involvement of trade unions

1.1. The CBQ system: a central role for validation in Finland

The competence-based qualification (CBQ) system allows every adult to have his prior learning validated by demonstrating his skills, *at workplace*. This system exists since 1994, even if it has only recently been codified for the 'vocational basic' level in a law passed in 2006. The possibility of recognition of competences whatever the place they have been acquired (recognition of prior learning) is a 'core principle', in the CBQ system (in the field of adult education), but also in the field of higher education (universities). The main principle behind the CBQ system is the demonstration by the individual of his own learning outcomes at workplace. Each part of a given qualification in the CQB system can be acquired after a 'competence test' which can be performed inside a training school. The qualification belongs to one of the following levels: *vocational* qualification, *further vocational* qualification, *specialist vocational* qualification³, but all the tests for the other modules normally occur inside a firm. The Finnish system of validation is a flexible one: modules (part) may be

¹ The document 1 in Appendix presents the Finnish Education System.

² *Act on the national framework for qualifications and other learnings*.

³ Cf. document 2 in Appendix: the process for the 'specialist in Competence-Based qualification' qualification.

acquired separately. Once all the modules are completed, the individual gets his qualification. It is theoretically possible to go directly to the exam to take the competence test, but very often, an individual takes an exam after a preparatory training. The final certificate obtained by the individual is the recognition of his validated learning. It may correspond to a certificate for only a part or for the whole qualification⁴.

Apart from the CBQ system, validation may also take the form of recognition of prior learning at university, in the field of ‘higher education’. There is no unified framework in this field, where the initiative depends of autonomous decisions of universities.

1.2. The role of social partners in the institutional architecture of validation of NFIL

The Finnish system of validation in the field of adult education is strongly based on tripartite collaboration: social partners are involved in validation from the local to the national level. This tripartite involvement is a very relevant principle in the eyes of all interviewed people. It applies in the National Board of Education, in the qualification committees, as well as in the assessment groups.

The national board of education (NBE) is at the top of the ‘adult education’ and the CBQ system. The NBE monitors the work of the qualification committees. The NBE decides the number of qualifications and committees in the system. This institution collects the validation fees and organises the budget of the qualification committees. The NBE also makes other important tasks for validation, by delivering the certificate (the NBE sign the final paper certifying the “partial” degree or qualification) and by approving the plans for the future demand of skills. The NBE meetings occur one or two times per month. The NBE also trains the members of qualification committees, five days per year. The system can’t be ‘dictated’ by the NBE, the government, *etc.*, that is why the involvement of trade unions and firms is particularly important. The consensus between all parts is very important for the system to operate.

The social partners are involved in 26 sectorial *qualification committees*. The involvement of representatives of employers/employees attest the importance given to the working life in the system: indeed, they know well what is needed, required at the workplace in terms of skills. The qualification committees are in charge to anticipate sectorial needs for competences and qualification. In total, there exist 154 qualification committees composed of 1000 experts (representative of employers, employees and teachers). The qualifications committees lead other roles, as to define requirements for a qualification in the CBQ system, and approve the (individual) validation plans. Each committee is established for one or several qualifications. The selected members are selected for the qualification committees for a 3-year duration period. Tripartite groups are in charge of the assessment. In practice, it is not necessary for all members of the assessors group to be part of every step, only one should be present at each step of the process. Social partners plan and design the CBQ tests with training organisations, inform the authorities and organisers about the requirements of the working life. They participate to the (tri-partite) assessment of skills at the working place, in the assessors’ group. Trade Unions also advertise the system to their own members.

In addition, in the perspective of public dialogue and collective bargaining, *etc.*, social partners participate in many workgroups or programmes⁵ linked to education and training

⁴ In Finland, a worker is classified in a 6-category (lower to higher levels) referential inside his firm, with the salary related to that level. To have a degree theoretically permits the worker to be better classified, even it is not automatic, as it depends of collective agreements.

⁵ Workgroups set up, or suggested (to further develop the CBQ system, to deal with information and guidance system, to make working life more attractive to young people, apprenticeship training for least advantaged groups, to increase motivation of girls in applied sciences).

stakes. For instance, the confederation of Finnish industries is running two projects in order to search for future needs for knowledge, skills and competences in the firms (Services 2020, Education Intelligence).

Finally, social partners have agreed to raise the grant given by the Educational fund to people who have undertaken CBQ system.

1.3. The involvement of trade unions of Employees in experiences promoting validation: the example of SAK in the Noste and Osaava Pärjää programs

SAK (*Suomen Ammattiliittojen Keskusjärjestö*, Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions) is the most important confederation of trade unions in Finland⁶, that mainly represents manual workers (but not only: one third of its members corresponds to non-manual workers). SAK is very involved since the beginning in the questions of validation, and have experts in all that concerns adult education⁷. The validation of prior learning and the CBQ system are very important for SAK trade unions, especially because a very important share of the skills of the SAK members is acquired at work (their experience). SAK gives support to some members of the qualification committees to participate and to organize the voluntary work in qualification committees, in national board of education, in the assessment groups, etc. The CBQ system is also important for SAK's members, as it represents a flexible way to acquire skills (modules, possibility of apprenticeship: it is important too for SAK members to learn while working ["at workplace"]). One of the main motivations to favour the CBQ system is the equalization of opportunities, to offer a 'second chance' to some workers, or even 'endless chances' for lifelong learning. It also favours 'every day's innovation' (or the 'employee-based' innovation).

The involvement of members SAK in the training and in the CBQ system also allows them to have some elements of diagnosis regarding this system, and to participate to the proposals to make the system to evolve (see section 3).

SAK is involved in many programs in the field of training and validation, as illustrated by the *Noste* experience. The *Noste* programme launched by the Finnish Government, implemented on the 2003-2007 period, was designed to raise the education and training level of adults with low basic education⁸. The education and training experts of SAK have prepared their own project to support the *Noste* Programme: *Osaava Pärjää* ("the competent will cope"). The target group defined by the Parliament Adult Education Committee for the *Noste* Program was the 30-50 years old people without any secondary education⁹. This programme was divided into four main activities: 1-qualification of the CBQ system, 2-training for computer license qualification, 3-studies promoting educational guidance, etc., 4-outreach activities, information and counselling, and other measures promoting access to education and training.

Programmes include for instance the *Kartuke* research and development project, *Tykes* for the development projects of working communities, *Oivallus* project at the initiative of trade union of employer to think about future needs in training (cf. infra for a presentation of the project).

⁶ The other confederations of trade unions are STTK (*Suomen Toimihenkilökeskusjärjestö*, the Finnish confederation of Professionals, that gathers the majority of non-manual workers together), and AKAVA (Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland, mainly composed of graduate workers).

⁷ In particular, the staff from SAK involved in adult education knows the key people in national board of education, ministry, in a tradition of long-run relationship.

⁸ Cf. the report by Markku Liljeström (2010), "PROMOTING COMPETENCE AMONG ADULT EDUCATION. Programme for raising the education and training level among adult population in Finland 2003-2009 and Trade Unions Activities", the central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions SAK.

⁹ In Finland at the time, it was reported that 400 000 adult in their 30-50 years age were without any secondary education. SAK was notably involved in the Parliamentary committee to define the target group.

The *Osaava Pärjää* project, launched in 2003, was based on these last activities, and was the only one launched by a labour market organization, at a national scale. The project was focused on SAK members. The so-called “competence pilots”, (voluntary) peer support persons¹⁰, were activists from the Union in charge of encouraging employees to education and training, counselling and networking in that field. About 26 000 adults participate in the *Noste* Programme, and 10 000 vocational qualifications (wholly or partly) were passed. Surveys or observations made regarding the particular impact of the *Osaava Pärjää* programme suggest it “*had a significant influence on employees’ decisions to take up studies, although in most cases it seems to have been indirect*”. It also permitted a better cooperation between trade unions and education providers. Finally, in 2010, SAK launched a new project which extends the *Noste* programme. It aims to create a permanent network of education councillors, in collaboration with TSL association (*cf. infra*).

1.4. The employer side: the experience of EK (Finnish construction Trade Union)

1.4.1. The activity of the union

The confederation of Finnish Industries EK (*Elinkeinoelämän keskusliitto*) is the leading business organisation in Finland, representing the private sector with 16 000 member companies (95% of them are small and medium-size enterprises).

Ca. 100 members of the Finnish Industries Business (FIB) work in the qualification committees¹¹. Some members of FIB have notably participated to the European social-funded AHOT project, targeting the staff from the higher education institutions (both ‘universities’ and ‘polytechnics’). The addressed question was: how could be assessed the types of skills learned by someone? A particular relevant question for FIB is: how may the skills *of young people* be assessed? At the basis of the AHOT project was the idea to favour people to acquire higher education, including people at work. Indeed, the needed skills for business evolve with time, and there exists a growing need of well-qualified people: what changes could be made in the studies, in the skills of the workers to make them ‘up to date’? This is the reason why every three or four years, qualifications are renewed, are opened up in the country. In particular, ‘Polytechnics’ are in the perspective to enhance the particular qualifications needed by companies. ‘Universities’ are less inclined, in that perspective, to talk about this or to evolve. For Trade Unions of employers, the CBQ system and validation are particularly important in the perspective to evaluate, to let workers know what they learn in their business life. One of the main goals is to make a worker not studying something that he already has.

At the European level, Business Europe has a high interest for the companies’ involvement in the question of validation of NFIL: what kind of competences should a worker validate? In addition, as some skills need to be very wide (*e.g.*, a manager) and some others need to be rather narrow (specialist, engineer, *etc.*), another relevant question is how wide/narrow should be the needed skills? And what is the benefit for the companies?

A particular project, the *Oivallus* Project, is a prospective study that focuses on the future needs of the Finnish Economy in 2020.

¹⁰ All activists from the Union were welcome to apply for training. 663 competence pilots were trained during the project, TSL (*cf. infra*), trade union institutes and SAK ‘education and training’ were responsible of that training.

¹¹ It represents, depending of the sector, 8 to 16 members per sectorial committees.

1.4.2. *The Oivallus Project: “What kind of education would prepare for work in the 2020’s*

The Oivallus or “competence needs of learning networks in tomorrow’s Finland” project has been run on the 2008-2011 period¹². This project was coordinated by the Confederation of Finnish Industries and financed by the European Social Fund, the National Board of Education and the Confederation of Finnish Industries. The core question addressed in the project was “what kind of education would prepare for work in the 2020’s?” in order to “*deliver a message from businesses to education policymakers regarding competence needs and education for the future*”. To intend some answers, companies, academics, teachers, and other experts have participated to deliberations. One of the central ideas of the project was to identify some trailblazers, characterized by a “*divergent thinking and doing*” as well as a network-like way of operating. The Final report exhibits some strong points or guidelines to provide the Finnish Economy the needed skills: “*the central issue will be whether people in companies know how to work in a new way, i.e. so that they generate renewed and new products and services.*”. The importance of social skills was particularly pointed up, as well as the need to develop collective intelligence¹³. Moreover, the importance of the acquisition of skills at workplace (learning by doing) was also enlightened. According to the report, individualization and flexibility in the training and education paths are also important points to make evolve the level and the content of needed skills.

2. Trade Unions and training system: example from three Finnish education centres

2.1. *TSL in Helsinki: non formal learning, notably for Trade Union staff.*

2.1.1. *The activity of the centre*

Työväen Sivistysliitto (TSL) or Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) is one of the biggest Finnish educational associations. The main proposed themes of popular adult education and training are often presented as non-formal learning¹⁴, ‘general education’, or ‘soft skills’. These skills incorporate team work skills, communicate skills, information technology skills and self-actualization, and promote educational activity in the Finnish society. This 90-year old organisation has strong links with the labour movement, in particular trade unions. For instance, SAK confederation is one of the members of the association. The content of the training is focused on some general skills provided notably (but not only) for labour representatives (see *infra*: the ‘developing people’s skills and competences’ project). For instance, the centre proposes a 6-days programme to become a ‘learning representative’ (an advisor in the CBQ system¹⁵), for the trade union activists that have this willingness: this TSL programme provides information and knowledge (regulation of work agreements, cooperation between employers-employees, learning possibilities at workplace, map the working environment as a network, how to create tools for networking, learning about the vocational education system).

¹² See Final Report of the *Oivallus* project (2011), Confederation of Finnish Industries.

¹³ “*We need education that supports and furthers working together*”.

¹⁴ Note that the CBQ system mainly permits validation for non-formal learning coming from work experience. But, in some cases, non-formal learnings coming from popular adult education may also be the object of validation.

¹⁵ These representative are volunteers, on the United-Kingdom model, and do not benefit from official support.

2.1.2. *The particular exemple of the ‘developing people’s skills and competences’ project*

The “developing people’s skills and competences” project is a running ESF (European Social Fund) funded project (2010-2013) with the goal to enhance the learning and communicating skills. Two major goals are pursued through this project: 1°) to build up and strengthen the learning network (labour market actors), 2°) to encourage and support workers to develop their learning skills and skills for work. The target groups are especially trade union activists at workplace, but also all salaries who want to develop their network at local or national level. The targeted networking in this programme corresponds to networking with unions of the central organisation of Finnish Trade unions, employers and shop stewards at workplaces, leaders of union organisations, vocational training centres, apprenticeship municipalities, *etc.*



2.2. *The ‘Siikaranta-opisto’ training centre of Espoo: vocational education and general education.*

Siikaranta-opisto is a college founded in 1964 by Rakennusliitto, the Construction Trade Union, which provides vocational training and education and free adult education for construction workers. The training center has the folk high school status since 1981, which permits a 50% state funding for free adult education (the rest coming from support from the confederation [SAK] and from student fees).

The centre arranges further and specialist vocational qualifications in construction and related works. It represents a significant adult educational institute in the field of construction, with over 250 qualifications in 2007 and about 700 different competence tests. It mainly focuses on further and specialist vocational qualifications / competence based tests.

Students are professional craftsmen “*who don’t necessary need long ‘theory-based’ studies*”. Hence, the centre focuses on competence tests that take place on their own working sites (“*real working life conditions and situations are required*”). Teachers are doing their job mostly in working sites arranging competence together with the student and the employer¹⁶.

The centre also provides general education for shop stewards, labour protection delegates and for the Construction Trade Union (legislation, negotiation skills, meaning of collective agreements, risk evaluation, social issues, *etc.*).

¹⁶ “*The more the teachers are absent from the college, the more I’m happy*” (principal Markku Hiltunen).



2.3. TAKK, one of the leading (vocational) adult education centres in Finland

TAKK (*Tampereen Aikuiskoulutuskeskus Kuvat*) is one of the biggest Adult Education centres in Finland. TAKK is located in Pirkanmaan, near Tampere, and operates mostly locally (the Tampere region), but also nationally and internationally. It has a foundation status, whose board is composed of members from the Tampere City council, the Tampere Chamber of commerce and by leading labour organizations: from the central organization of Trade Union (SAK), and from the confederation of Finnish Industries (EK).

The training courses offered by TAKK aim at vocational, further and specialist qualifications. These courses are based on national curricula approved by the National Board of Education. The Centre notably offers preparatory training and possibility to take 100 qualifications, work life test, passports (*e.g.* hygiene, first aid, fire, safety, *etc.*, that could be also represent a part of a qualification) and certificates (to be able to go after to university or polytechnics). The things intensively discussed in TAKK in the field of lifelong learning include, for instance, how to plan education on a more long-term basis, how to develop counselling and improve relations with working life. At the end of training, it is usual to have visit of trade unions that explain to the trainee the situation of the labour market, common salary, *etc.* In certain fields, some “working groups” are set up, and discuss about forecasting (social fields, logistics, technology...).

TAKK’s instructors are involved in teams and qualifications committees preparing for the basis for qualifications. Around 200 of TAKK’s instructors are specialists in competence-based qualifications.

Finally, some important issues related to the training activities of TAKK:

- The Age parameter represents important stakes, because of the probable lack of labour in some fields in Finland in the years to come. Moreover, the unemployment rate of older people in the region of Tampere is significantly higher that at the national level (ca. 14% versus ca. 8%).
- *About migrants.* Most of migrants in Finland have language problems, and do not have any education certificates¹⁷. The TAKK centre notably provides immigrant education.



¹⁷ However, it shall be noted that in some cases, formal learning by migrants acquired abroad may be validated by the National Board of Education.

3. Questioning the impact of the system of validation: diagnosis and propositions of actors of the system to make it to evolve

The Finnish system of validation is known for its very good quantitative results¹⁸. The number of workers that benefited from validation is very important. Furthermore, women seem to be the main beneficiaries of validation. Looking further at the results in qualitative terms allows qualifying these results. First, we may question who are the main beneficiaries of the validation experiences (target population), and to what extent the obtained results may be qualified in the perspective on lifelong learning. Then some possible limits of the current system of validation or of its application are addressed, and some proposals to make it evolve are also pointed out.

3.1. *Qualify the results of the system in terms of training and validation of NFIL: rather good quantitative results hide somewhat disappointing effects?*

3.1.1. *Some disappointing results in terms of training and validation of NFIL?*

What happened in Finland in terms of training and validation of NFIL may appear somewhat disappointing from a certain perspective. Indeed, the search for rise in higher education wanted since the 1990's for economic reasons (crisis, *etc.*) has not worked so well, to a certain extent. One of the problems is that that social bargaining is focused on labour market concerns and does not include training. Indeed, collective bargaining includes wages, working time, working conditions, but not training. Now, an important research work suggests that wages returns to training are substantial, and even very substantial, for Finland¹⁹.

The need for training as a joint idea between employers-employees dates back from the last 1970's in Finland: the idea was to build some education plans, with some jointly assessed needs of training should be. This has worked rather well in the 1980's, but this philosophy has been somehow lost in the 1990's with the crisis. Indeed, firms do not actually behave like this: on the 1995-2008 period of time, only 50-60% of the firms have such plans. Statistics of Eurostat show that for Finland, but also for all European countries, the time devoted to Lifelong learning has started to decrease²⁰. In addition, the firm-financed training has decreased while jointly financed (*i.e.* both by government and firms) training has started to rise.

Moreover, the results of the CBQ system may be disappointed to the extent that the (Ca.) 20% of the occupied finish population is without any basic or vocational education didn't really benefit from the system, which signifies that this system has rather benefited to higher-skilled workers.

¹⁸ Cf. the statistics presented in Anna-Mari Nevala (2010), *European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and informal learning 2010. Country Report: Finland*, CEDEFOP and GHK.

http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/F/TK53CM8NUI855RIEG4Q79J4CCPC9K29XMJ1AJIGRHHQRBYXB8A-07350?func=full-set-set&set_number=000598&set_entry=000041&format=999

¹⁹ Erkki Laukkanen (2010), *Wage returns to training: Evidence from Finland*, The Labour institute for Economic Research, Finland.

²⁰ But, according to the available data, it also permits a more balance of training between low skilled and high skilled workers.

3.1.2. *About the targeted populations of the process of validation*

In Finland, women attend more education and training than men. In particular, more than 50% of the beneficiaries of the Finnish validation system of NFIL are women. But looking further the gender parameter allows also to point out a somewhat “paradox”, as male tend to be more passive in adult education, but benefit more in terms of salary if they obtain a rise in their qualification. Meanwhile, surveys in that field point out that women search firstly a better work. A large share of women works in the public sector, which may partly explains why they benefit less than men from validation, in terms of salary. Some particular sectors reveal some potential substantial need of validation for women, as the construction work sector, when women mainly work in some cleaning and low skilled jobs.

Moreover, others important populations that could largely benefit from validation of NFIL are the young uneducated people and the migrants²¹. An important and recurrent discussion in Finland concerns the large number of drop-out of young people without any diploma, each year. In the beginning of the 2000's, the population of young people without any diploma was estimated to 40 000-50 000. This population is a major concern for public policies. Furthermore, immigrant workers are also a very important population that could be targeted by actions of validation. They are very well represented in the construction work sector: mostly of them are low skilled workers, are not members of trade unions and are not paid above at the minimum wage of the collective agreements, especially in the construction work sector.

Finally, another potential and important target for the system of validation could also be some of the workers of the traditional industries sectors. It mainly concerns paper and metal industries in the northern Finland area. The collapse and restructuring experience of these industries²² represents an important concern for public policies²³.

3.2. *Limits and difficulties of the current system*

The current system of validation and the institutional framework are now nearly 20-years old. That corresponds to a long experience in validation, with some possible limits that have been exposed in the previous sub-sections. Some interviewed actors of the training and validation system have helped to identified and to expose some limits or difficulties of the existing ‘administrative’ framework.

One of the reported difficulties is that the current system is based on voluntary work (for instance, for the work as assessor, in the qualifications committees, or in the administration of the system). The open question is so: how much time can they take for that? The free time that can be taken by the representative depends of his specific role. ‘Normal’ employees have to ask to their employers. That involvement requires much time (evenings, *etc.*), and denotes the need to be deeply committed to the system.

Another pointed out recurrent problem is that of the resources, notably in a system that requires voluntaries work. Hence, secretaries of the qualification committees should (could) have more resources for administration (what is paid corresponds to the fee for validation, which represent a rather ‘small’ amount).

²¹ Note that there exist, for these populations, some policies or programmes lead by public authorities or trade unions.

²² For instance, some important restructuring in the paper sector is currently taking place now, because of the competition of South America.

²³ Notably by the fact that many salaries worked from father to son in many of these industries.

It is also frequently pointed out that it is not always easy to organize the assessor's work, which is particularly difficult for an individual worker.

Other difficulties that are frequently pointed out include:

- *On the experience of validation for adult students*: the fact that many adult students do not behave as very autonomous. They often think that they need some preparatory training, even their own learning make there is no need for that, and feel somehow 'insecure' to see reduce the duration or the content of their studies. The validation of prior learning also make individuals to avoid studying inside a group, while collective study is important, especially for men.
- There may be some kind of competition of validation between the validation process in the CBQ system with the VET providers. Indeed, training institutions get better financing if they got more students. Finally, after discussion between advisor, teacher and learner, the learner decides.
- Another difficulty is that trade unions and employers should be deeply committed to the system to make it well work (note that is also represents a 'guarantee', or a good practice of the current system).
- The resistance from universities (professors) to the CBQ system, even if some polytechnics have their own kind of systems of validation. The recognition of prior learning, in that perspective, depends of the teachers' willingness.
- The current process of validation is often seen as a bureaucratic way to get recognition of prior learning ("too many papers").
- The necessity to take care of the viability of the assessment (rely that in every case, people assess the same way, which represents a quality assurance).
- *About the impact on salaries for employees that benefited from validation*: theoretically, if qualification rises, you may benefit from rise in the salary. But, in many branches there are no collective agreements: it depends of the sector, or of the good will of the firms.
- *On the particular learning that actually benefited from validation process*. Theoretically, validation of prior learning is possible whatever the way they are acquired, but in practice, this mainly concern learning acquired in working situations.
- The possibility of validation is very much related to the good will of the firms, as the competence tests occur at workplace.
- The system has not worked too much good for migrants, especially because of the language problem (it is necessary to speak Finnish to pass the qualification).

3.3. *Some proposals to make the system to evolve*

Some actors of the current system of validation, notably trade unions, have their own proposals to make the system of validation or its practical appliance to evolve. If the system could be questioned not only in its quantitative objectives but also in its qualitative objectives and more oriented towards some specific target group (see *supra*), some possible improvements for the daily functioning of the system have been pointed out.

We list below some of these proposals:

- The best practices should be enlightened, notably by making benchmarking surveys/studies (forums, seminars, *etc.*).
- Qualification committees should have more common methods.
- Administrative burden should be alleged in order to simplify the system ("too many papers"), notably in the relations with the national board of education.

- To stress more the information and the possibilities offered by the validation to employers but also to teachers, notably in polytechnics.

Some other proposals take the form of ‘questions’ about the changes that could occur to benefit more to the firms or to the employees, to make the system more readable or more fitted to the needs of the Finnish economy:

- The given degrees tend now to be more general than some years ago. Should the degrees be more specialized²⁴? It could also be possible to reduce the number of available titles: there is currently around 400 different degrees. A reduced number of degrees could notably allow an easier way to classify the worker in the “1 to 6” category of worker inside the firm.
- Finally, the system of requirement could also be renewed, by questioning the type of skills that fits for a certain qualification: how narrow or wide are the skills required²⁵?

Conclusion: A mature system of validation, but that could evolve

Finland benefits from a mature system of validation. The institutional framework is built since nearly twenty years and the participation of social actors as well as voluntary workers renders necessary the ‘good willingness’ to involve and also the consensus which represents a very important value in the Finnish society. Finland benefits from a mature system of validation, but as exposed in the previous sub-section, this system could possibly evolve, as suggested by some of its actors, both in the definition of objectives (target populations) and in the practical ways. The recent development include, a proposal in June 2012 for a law on ‘competence development’ with quantitative and qualitative guidelines (about, notably, at least 3 mandatory annual training days, and on the process for assessment at workplace).

In the context of the economic crisis and with the current stakes for Finland, validation may be assumed as needed most than ever. Indeed, more and more, enhanced by the crisis, there is a growing trend, as well as in other European or OECD countries, to the polarization of the labour market in Finland (good jobs vs bad jobs: low-paid and precarious jobs versus good-paid jobs).

Finally, the validation of prior learning seems to stay a very relevant question for the Finnish society as shown by the programme of the new Finnish government (June 2011), which points out some relevant points regarding the validation of NFIL and in particular recognition for migrants: *“The recognition of prior learning and learning acquired abroad will be made part of all education from the basic level to adult education. A competence-based definition of qualifications will be endorsed.”*; *“The integration and employment of migrants (...) will be promoted through education. (...) The recognition of existing competencies, language skills and vocational skills of migrants will be developed.”* (Programme of Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen’s Government, p. 51).

Finally, we would like to relay a message from some actors of the Finnish National board of Education which are very inclined and interested in the possibility to share experiences in the field of validation of prior learning, and ready to welcome interested people or institutions from foreign countries in that perspective.

²⁴ For instance, the requirements for the ‘specialist vocational’/expert level qualifications would be, in that perspective, too narrow.

²⁵ e.g., very wide skills may be needed for a manager, while rather narrow skills may be required for more specific occupation.

Appendix: meetings

Suomen Ammattiliittojen Keskusjärjestö (SAK, Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions) Headquarters (12th and 13th December 2011)

Kirsi Rasinaho, Adviser Education and Training

Markku Liljeström, Head of Unit

Erkki Laukkanen, Economist

Työväen Sivistysliitto (TSL) - Workers' Educational Association (13th December 2011)

Katri Söder, Information and International Issues

Mervi Ylitalo, Training Planner

Suomen toimihenkilöiden (STTK) Headquarters (13th December 2011)

Mikko Heinikoski, Senior Adviser Education Policy

Siikarantaopisto Institute (Rakennusliitto, Construction Trade Union, 14^h December 2011)

Kyösti Suokas, Rakennusliitto Second Chairman

Vesa Holappa, Siikarantaopisto Principal

Ministry of Education and culture (15^h December 2011)

Petri Haltia, Counsellor of Education

Elinkeinoelämän Keskusliitto EK (Confederation of Finnish Industries) (15^h December 2011)

Tarja Tuominen, Senior Adviser

National Board of Education (15^h December 2011)

Markku Kokkonen, Counsellor of Education

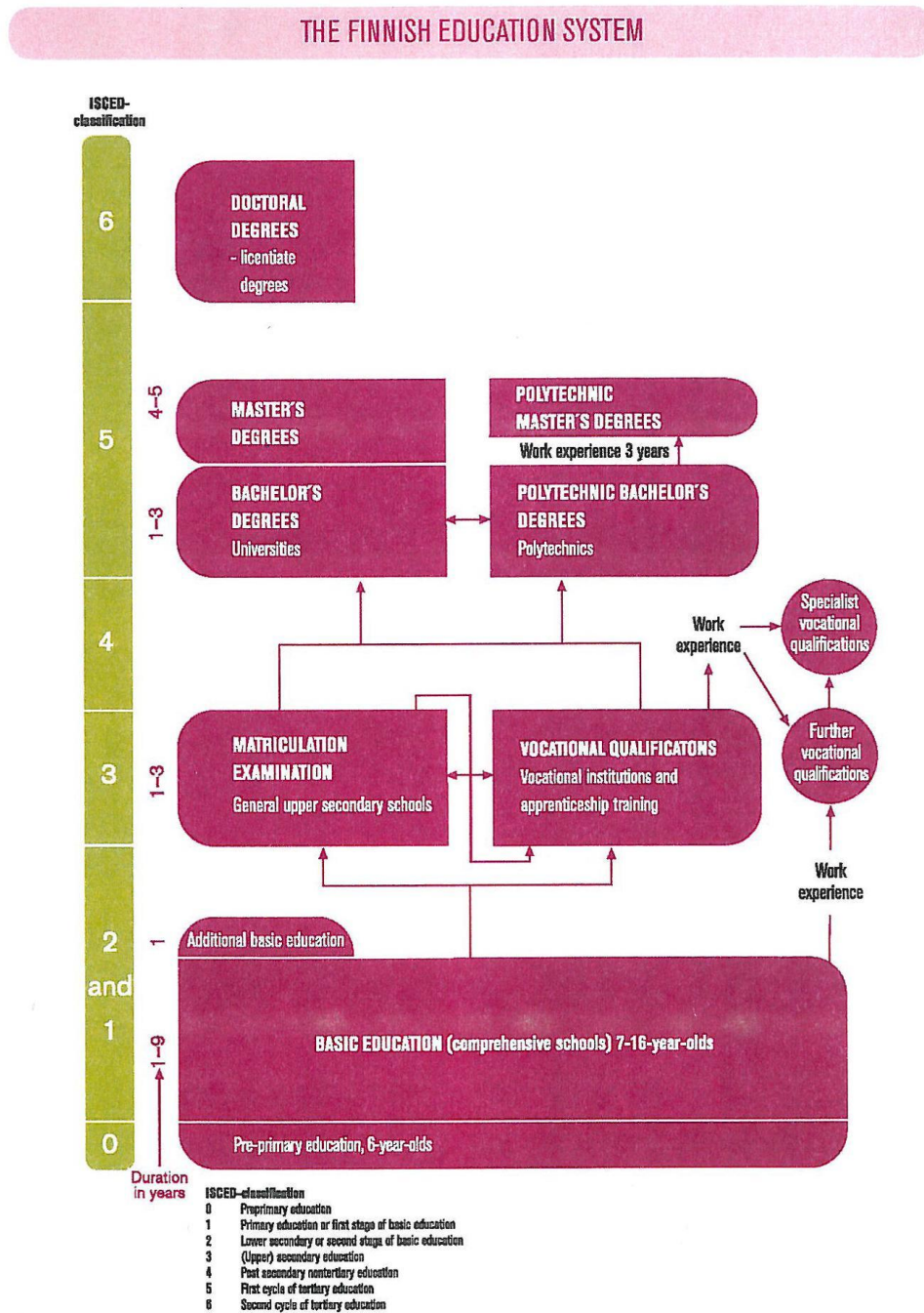
Tampereen Aikuikoulutuskeskus Kuvat (TAKK) (16^h December 2011)

Päivi Puutio, Project Director

Eeva-Kaisa Mäkinen, Vice-Chairman

Appendix: documents

Document 1: The Finnish Education system



Document 2: The 'specialist in Competence-Based qualification' qualification



2005

