



## **APEL in Estonia**

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*Aili Saluveer, Senior Specialist for APEL, University of Tartu*

*Maire Sander, Referent, Estonian Non-formal Adult Education Association (ENAEA)*

*Anu Kose, Head of Studies, Võrumaa Vocational Education Centre*

#### **Background**

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

There are big changes and reforms taking place in Estonian educational policy in last years. Together with reforms there was diversification of educational institutions, curricula become more flexible, number of drop-outs is significant, increase in the number of adult learners, international and local mobility and establishment of the requirements for professional qualifications.

After the reform of higher education according to the principles of the Bologna Declaration in 2001, Estonian universities recognised the need for accreditation of prior formal learning. Being the second reform during the last ten years, the Bologna process introduced several new qualifications that differed from the previous ones both in purpose as well as length of study.

#### **Validation in Estonia**

In Estonia we are talking about holistic approach for APEL. Starting from Transfine and Refine projects we have clear understanding that there is a need to assess formal, non-formal and informal learning as a whole set of competencies of a person who is looking for validation. APEL = Accreditation of Prior AND Experiential Learning (varasemate õpingute ja töökogemuse arvestamine – VÕTA).

There is no common regulation for all educational levels in Estonia for considering the accreditation of prior learning and work experience. System of APEL is in Estonia in development phase and complementing of legislation on APEL issues is to be foreseen. Some regulations give the educational institutions obligation to accredit prior and experiential learning.

#### **Higher Education**

Process of implementing APEL started mainly 2003. After some international seminars, participation in European projects and discussions the University Act allowed up to 50% of the HE programmes to be obtained through APEL. Starting from September 2007 there is no such limitation but is stated that HE institutions cannot award whole diploma or certificate on the basis of prior and experiential learning. Neither APL nor APEL could be used for access to the university - replacing necessary qualification for entrance, everybody needs to have previous level diploma. This is still issue of debates; universities are

looking for opening the access, but by changing the University Act the Ministry of Education and Research were against it.

Implementation of APEL in higher education is governed by the following legal provisions:

#### 1. University Act

The University Act requires since 2003 the universities to accredit prior and experiential learning and gives the universities the obligation to elaborate the rules and procedures for APEL.

#### 2. Applied Higher Education Act

Since 2003 requires the higher education institutions to accredit prior and experiential learning and gives the higher education institutions the obligation to elaborate the rules and procedures for APEL.

#### 3. Higher Education Standard

In 2007 the rules and purposes of APEL were set in major principles by Higher Education Standard that required the Universities to update and uniform their regulations during 2008. Higher Education standard gives descriptions of learning outcomes for higher education levels. Same HE level descriptors will be used in Estonian Qualifications Framework.

### **Vocational Education**

Development of the APEL system and regulation in legislation is also started for vocational education and training. Today the Vocational Education Act (*Kutseõppeasutuse seadus*) regulates only mobility between VET institutions and requires accreditation of prior studies.

The purpose of Accreditation of Prior Learning and Work Experience (APEL) is development of links between lifelong learning and the levels of education, the studies and the labour market. APEL enables to highlight and recognise the knowledge, skills and competencies of a person, irrespective of how they were acquired, and increases the flexibility of opportunities for vocational education and professional careers.

APEL can be used in the following vocational education processes:

- Verification of compliance with admission requirements of a program or curriculum;
- Continuation of unfinished studies;
- Transfer between curricula within a school and between schools;
- Award of professional qualifications.

APEL enables to recognise:

- Courses completed at another educational institution (general and vocational education);
- Competencies acquired through in-service training or independent studies;
- Knowledge and skills acquired through work experience.

The main criterion is the compatibility of the content of prior learning and work experience with the study program or professional standard in question.

The national legislation governing the implementation of APEL is very general and most schools use their own regulations, such as the regulations of studies and the admission rules.

Implementation of APEL in vocational education is governed by the following legal provisions:

#### 1. Vocational Education Institutions Act

Sets conditions and procedure for commencement of studies at school - if vacant places exist, students have the right to continue their studies commenced at one school according to the curriculum of the same vocation or profession at another school. Upon transfer to the curriculum of another vocation or profession, a student shall pass all the examinations and assessments, which were not included in the curriculum of the previous school.

Students who have interrupted their studies in a school have the right, under the conditions established by a regulation of the Minister of Education and Research, to continue studies at an upper secondary school in order to acquire secondary education.

Head of school shall approve the rules of internal procedure, of administration and the rules for organisation of studies of the school by a directive;

School board shall approve the rules for organisation of studies of the school and supervise the fulfilment thereof.

## 2. Procedure for Admission of Students to Vocational Education Institutions

- specifies the conditions of admission to the vocational education institution, incl. requirements for completed education and the principle that prior learning should be accredited on the basis of the documents submitted by the applicant.

## 3. Vocational Education Standard

The national curriculum is a document, which determines the purposes and functions of vocational training, the requirements for starting and graduating from the studies, the modules of curricula and the volumes thereof together with short descriptions, the possibilities of and conditions for electing modules and possibilities of specialisation.

## 4. List of mandatory documents relating to schooling at vocational education institutions and the formats and procedure for completion thereof.

The regulation of studies shall set out the principles of the organisation of studies, including the accreditation of prior learning of a student.

## 5. Professions Act

The system of professions is part of the qualification system for the accreditation of learning outcomes. The system of professions establishes a link between the education system and the labour market.

### **Professional level and qualifications framework**

Professional levels are comparable to education levels and the system of professions and the educational system belong to a single qualifications framework that enables international comparability.

The scope and functions of APEL can vary in different schools. The vocational schools that offer study programs mainly for people with completed secondary education have more opportunities for implementation of APEL.

Currently, a procedure for the amendment of the Vocational Education Standard has been initiated and a respective work group has been established by a directive of the Minister of Education and Research. The rules and purposes of APEL will be set in the Vocational Education Standard (*Kutseharidusstandard*) during 2009, process is started and the workgroup of Estonian ESF APEL project sent the proposals to the Ministry of Education and Research in 2008.

### **Attestation and award of professional qualifications**

According to the Professions Act (*Kutseeadus*), the award of professional qualifications is a process by which a person displays the level of his or her professional competence. Attestation methods are a written or oral examination, test assignment, attestation on the basis of documents or a combination of methods. They are set by the awarding body.

Generally, for lower level professions, the qualification attestation does not demand a formal education certificate as a prerequisite. The awarding body should validate and recognise the results of non-formal education. Standards in higher levels demand a higher education diploma. In a re-attestation process, the awarding body takes into account the results of non-formal education certificate or higher education diploma. To obtain a Professional Certificate it is required, depending on profession, to take an exam or to present documents verifying the skills, knowledge and experience. The Professions Act was renewed in 2008 and standards of professional qualifications are in development, putting more stress on APEL principles and tools.

Estonian Qualification Authority started new ESF program "Development of professional qualifications system" (2008-2013) which general objective is a supporting and sustainable professional qualifications system, regarding labour market needs, has been implemented on lifelong learning and on the free

movement of workers. This program will be carried out in wider co-operation with representatives of labour market, vocational and higher education.

### **Third Sector**

Non-governmental (non-profit, civic org-s) organizations provide wide selection of NFL and INL activities. Yet there is not any complete research about the real situation in this field.

So far, cases of positive validation have been rather rare.

**The Estonian Non-formal Adult Education Association (ENAEA)** is non-governmental, national umbrella organisation in the non-formal adult education field associating education-orientated NGOs. The Estonian Non-formal Adult Education Association (ENAEA) has about 50 member organizations which are non-formal adult education centres that provide wide variety of courses for adults.

Input activities for VNFL-IFL

1. ENAEA has participated in Nordic-Baltic project JAVAL (Joint Action for the Validation of Non-formal Adult Learning).

The main goal of this project was to clarify the terms, definitions and understandings used in this field.

2. Theoretical results of JAVAL project are used in curriculum development process at the Adult Education Center of ENAEA. There is demand for learning outcome-based curricula. Learning outcomes give more transparency for the actors in the validation process. Ongoing process.

3. Self-evaluation process of the non-formal adult education centers commenced in 2006. Ongoing process.

4. Partnership with qualification authorities is ongoing.

At present there is no definite information about the number of qualifications that recognize non-formal learning in the application process.

5. Initiative of the Ministry of Education and Research will give an opportunity to include non-formal learning in its database in the nearest future.

6. In the frame of ESF programme ENAEA will have a chance to carry out research in the field of non-formal adult education sector in 2011-2012.

### **Publications and research in APEL**

1. Peebo, A., Saluveer, A., et al. 2008. Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning. Applicant Guide. (*VÕTA Varasemate õpingute ja töökogemuse arvestamine Taotleja juhend*). Tartu. ISBN 978-9949-18-116-2
2. Urbla, A., Lindpere, M., et al. 2008. Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning. Counsellor Guide (*VÕTA Varasemate õpingute ja töökogemuse arvestamine Nõustaja juhend*). Tartu. ISBN 978-9949-18-118-6
3. Pilli, E., Udam, M., Saluveer, A., et al. 2008. Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning. Assessor Guide (*VÕTA Varasemate õpingute ja töökogemuse arvestamine Hindaja juhend*). Tartu. ISBN 978-9949-18-117-9
4. Murakas, R., Lepik, A., Dsiss, H., et al. 2007. Interruption of university studies and possibilities for resumption. Overview of the research "New Beginning". (*Ülikooliõpingute katkemine ja taasalustamise võimalused. Ülevaade uuringu UUS ALGUS tulemustest.*) Tartu. ISBN 978-9949-11-736-9

The book provides an overview of a study exploring the issues related to the interruption of studies, re-entering the education system and the recognition of prior and experiential learning. The study was

conducted within the sub-project "The Development and Implementation of Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL)" of the European Social Fund project "Enhancing the Competition Capacity of University Graduates Through the Development of the Quality of Study Activities" (the LÜKKA project). The survey, conducted by mail and by the Internet, included 446 people who had interrupted their university studies. In addition to giving a general overview, the study focuses on special features characterising the former students of the four public institutions of higher education in Estonia. Due to research methodology, the answers tend to be characteristic of those ex-students who are interested in the survey topic and who intend to resume their studies, or have considered doing so – in other words, the target group of the APEL project.

5. Murakas, R., Lepik, A., Saluveer, A., et al. 2008. TAKE or LEAVE: Interruption of studies and resumption and accreditation prior and experiential learning. In "QUO VADIS; Estonian Higher Education?" (*VÕTA või JÄTA: Õpingute katkemine ja taasastamine ning varasemate õpingute ja töökogemuse arvestamine. Kogumikus QUO VADIS; EESTI KÕRGHARIDUS?*) Tartu Ülikooli kirjastus. ISBN 978-9949-11-827-4

Three studies were conducted within the sub-project "The Development and Implementation of Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL)" of the European Social Fund project "Enhancing the Competition Capacity of University Graduates Through the Development of the Quality of Study Activities" (the LÜKKA project). This article gives an overview and compares opinions and experience in APEL in three different target groups – students, graduates, and those who have interrupted their studies.

### Developments

In a situation characterised by increasing importance of the lifelong learning agenda and the pursuit of a better match between education and changing needs of the job market, developing a nationally effective APEL system has become a priority for the Ministry of Education and Research. APEL is one of the key issues on the National Adult Education Priorities List and the National Adult Education Strategic Plan. In collaboration with the Ministry, the University of Tartu has launched and finished an ambitious project financed by the European Social Fund (LÜKKA, [www.ut.ee/lykka](http://www.ut.ee/lykka)), for developing a national APEL system. The project and the envisaged system encompass also other universities, applied higher education institutions, vocational education institutions, qualifications agencies, and employers' associations. The project developed APEL tools and practices, promoted APEL networking in Estonia, provided advanced training to APEL assessors and set up and implemented a system of quality standards for APEL. The next period of ESF Programmes, PRIMUS Programme started 2008 and is including many APEL developments (APEL network, APEL Council (experts), support for APEL counsellors, and further development of APEL assessment, staff development – training for counsellors and assessors, development of website and handbooks for APEL). Thus, the coming years may be expected to speed up progress in many aspects of APEL.

Main important developments:

- Estonian Qualifications Framework and level descriptions (including HE qualifications) – will be adopted 2009
- Curriculum development – describing (redesigning) study programmes in learning outcomes, will be finished and adopted in September 2009
- Broadening of APEL network by ESF PRIMUS Programme 2008-2015
- Further development of training and support system for APEL professionals (PRIMUS)
- APEL information database, user guides and web-based portal <http://vota.archimedes.ee>
- Adult Education Strategic Plan 2009-2013 <http://www.hm.ee/index.php?popup=download&id=8687>

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2. University Act (*Ülikooliseadus*), RT I 1995, 12, 119, last amendments 2008.  
<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/ert/act.jsp?id=13153093>
  3. Applied Higher Education Act (*Rakenduskõrgkooli seadus*), RT I 1998, 61, 980.  
<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/ert/act.jsp?id=13009724>
  4. Higher Education Standard (*Kõrgharidusstandard*), RT I, 2008, 57, 322.  
<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/ert/act.jsp?id=13099603>
  5. Professions Act (*Kutseseadus*), RT I 2008, 24, 156. <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/ert/act.jsp?id=12974050>
  6. Vocational Education Institutions Act (*Kutseõppeasutuse seadus*), RT I 1998, 64/65, 1007,  
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  7. Vocational Education Standard (*Kutseharidusstandard*) RTI 2006, 16, 131,  
[www.riigiteataja.ee/ert/act.jsp?id=1014805](http://www.riigiteataja.ee/ert/act.jsp?id=1014805)
  8. List of mandatory documents relating to schooling at vocational education institutions and the formats and procedure for completion thereof (*Kutseõppeasutuses peetavate õppetegevuse alaste kohustuslike dokumentide loetelu, nende vormid ja täitmise kord*), RTL, 2005, 56, 786,  
[www.riigiteataja.ee/ert/act.jsp?id=901995](http://www.riigiteataja.ee/ert/act.jsp?id=901995)
  9. Procedure for Admission of Students to Vocational Education Institutions (*Õpilaste kutseõppeasutusse vastuvõtu kord*), RTL 2002, 50, 712, last amendments 2006.  
[www.riigiteataja.ee/ert/act.jsp?id=12733535](http://www.riigiteataja.ee/ert/act.jsp?id=12733535)
  10. Lifelong Learning Strategy (*Elukestva õppe strateegia*), 2005-2008  
<http://www.hm.ee/index.php?popup=download&id=4958>
  11. Estonian Higher Education Strategy (*Kõrgharidusstrateegia*), 2006–2015  
<http://www.hm.ee/index.php?03236>
  12. Conditions and Procedure of Accreditation of Prior Learning and Work Experience (*Varasemate õpingute ja töökogemuse arvestamise tingimused ja kord*, Tartu Ülikooli nõukogu 21. detsembri 2008. määrus.) [http://www.ut.ee/livelink\\_files/1238615.htm](http://www.ut.ee/livelink_files/1238615.htm)