



REPUBLIC OF ESTONIA
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
AND RESEARCH



European Union
European Social Fund



Investing
in your future

Implementing the 2012 Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning

One-off report of Estonia

2023

The report has been prepared by the area of skills and qualifications policy of the Ministry of Education and Research on the basis of the overview of Estonia's VNIL system prepared by OÜ Kasvulava in 2023 on behalf of Estonian Qualifications Authority.

Contents

Introduction.....	3
1. Organisation of validation of non-formal and informal learning	4
1.1. General principles of recognition of non-formal and informal learning	4
1.2. Background of the VNIL system	5
1.3. Regulatory framework and implementation of the VNIL system	7
1.4. Mechanisms for identification, documentation and assessment of learning outcomes.....	13
1.5. Making the skills and knowledge acquired through open digital learning resources or learning mobility visible.....	18
2. Scope of implementation of VNIL or qualifications acquired with VNIL	19
2.1. Qualifications acquired through the validation of non-formal and informal learning.....	19
2.2. VNIL in entering formal education	21
3. Connections between the implementation of VNIL and other tools that support transparency and recognition.....	21
4. Supporting Individuals in using VNIL.....	22
4.1. VNIL counselling	22
4.2. Supporting socially disadvantaged target groups.....	23
4.3. Affordability of using VNIL for the applicant	25
5. Role of stakeholders in the implementation of VNIL.....	26
6. Enhancing the operational capacity and quality assurance of parties involved in VNIL	28
6.1. Supporting counsellors and assessors	28
6.2. Development of the assessment infrastructure.....	29
6.3. Quality assurance of the VNIL system	30
7. Assessment and supervision	31
Summary conclusions.....	33
Sources cited	36

Introduction

The 2012 recommendation of the Council of the European Union on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012/C 398/01)¹ calls on Member States to introduce measures that enable individuals to recognise knowledge and skills acquired outside of the formal education system (eg in continuing education, at work, at home, or through volunteering) by 2018.

This report provides an overview of the implementation of this recommendation in Estonia as of 2023. In the Estonian education and professional qualifications system, the validation process of non-formal and informal learning recognises prior learning and work experience when obtaining formal education or applying for professional qualification. In Estonia, this process is called the VNIL (validation of non-formal and informal learning) system, in Estonian VÕTA (varasemate õpingute ja töökogemuse arvestamine). The purpose of the report is to give an overview of the current state and developments of the VNIL system in Estonia. The structure of the report follows the structure agreed on by the Member States of the European Qualification Framework Advisory Group (EQF AG).

In Estonia, implementation of the VNIL principles has been a focal point of the development plans in the field of education (including the Education Strategy 2021–2035) for more than 20 years. In the education and vocational system, implementation of VNIL is based on uniform principles following the recommendation for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in the European Union and on the provisions of laws and educational standards. However, there are still challenges and the need for development in the implementation of the VNIL system in relation to individual flexible learning paths, digital infrastructure developments and the objectives for supporting participation in lifelong learning.

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32012H1222%2801%29>

1. Organisation of validation of non-formal and informal learning

1.1. General principles of recognition of non-formal and informal learning

Development activities related to the assessment and validation of knowledge, skills, and competences acquired in the course of non-formal and informal learning and work experience were started more than 20 years ago in Estonia. Today, Estonia uses the VNIL system, which is implemented in higher, vocational and general education, as well as when awarding professional qualifications. The term VÕTA (varasemate õpingute ja töökogemuse arvestamine in Estonian, validation of previous learning and working experience in English) as the acronym describing validation procedures, is accepted and actively used by parties of the system.

VNIL is the process by which the competent authority assesses an applicant's competence on the basis of specified criteria, ie the conformity of their knowledge, skills and attitudes with the admission conditions of an educational institution, the learning outcomes of the curriculum or part(s) thereof, or the competence requirements of the professional standard. If the applicant's competences comply with these requirements, they will be taken into account in fulfilling the admission conditions or curriculum, or when awarding professional qualification.

VNIL aims to

- value a person's competences and promote equal opportunities for their assessment and recognition, regardless of the time, place and manner in which the knowledge and skills were acquired;
- support lifelong learning and mobility between and within the education system and the labour market;
- improve access to education for persons, including socially disadvantaged persons, to expand their opportunities for education and to compete on the labour market, and to support more efficient use of both individual and societal resources.

The VNIL system consists of a regulatory and organisational framework (including legislation and guidelines, organisation of work, information and outreach procedures, consultancy and training services etc) and a substantive process comprised of consultation, application, assessment, recognition and feedback stages. The organisation and methods of VNIL are based on educational and professional standards and good practices. Trust, which stems from social recognition, well-defined quality standards and clear information about the assessment process and criteria, plays a central role.²

² https://hm.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2022-06/vota_kasiraamat.pdf

1.2. Background of the VNIL system

The development of the Estonian VNIL system was based on developments in the Estonian education system and the framework documents of the European Union, following the uniform European principles for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning agreed upon in 2004,³ the guidelines of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP)⁴, as well as the 2012 recommendations of the Council of the European Union on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.⁵

Recognition of skills and knowledge gained through non-formal and informal learning in order to support learning paths and the attainment of professional qualifications was one of the priorities of the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2005–2008.⁶ The goal was to apply the consideration and recognition of prior learning and work experience in all fields and levels of study. However, the scope of application of VNIL in higher, vocational, and general education and in the professional qualification system has varied.

The development of the legal bases of the Estonian VNIL system was started under the leadership of the higher education sector, following the uniform principles of validation of non-formal and informal learning as formulated by the European Commission in 2004.⁷ Within the framework of the project 'Ülikoolilõpetajate konkurentsivõime tõstmise läbi õppetegevuse kvaliteedi arenduse (LÜKKA)' (Increasing the competitiveness of university graduates through enhancing the quality of learning activities), supported by the European Social Fund in 2005–2008, the primary VNIL principles, assessment practices and the structure of the application process were developed by agreement between the parties.⁸ The experience of the Estonian Qualifications Authority in recognition of work experience in the process of acquiring professional qualification provided a unique contribution to the development activities of LÜKKA. In this regard, the Estonian Qualifications Authority can be considered a pioneer in VNIL, because since its creation the aim of the Estonian professional qualifications system has been to increase the competitiveness of the Estonian workforce and thereby to consider and recognise the skills and knowledge of employees regardless of the manner in which they are acquired.

The aim of future VNIL development activities was, among other things, to inform the population about new and more flexible opportunities in the acquisition of education. The

³https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/etv/Information_resources/EuropeanInventory/publications/EC_common_principles_validation_20040303.pdf

⁴<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/search?keywords=guidelines+for+validation+of+nonformal+and+informal+learningth>

⁵ [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/ET/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32012H1222\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/ET/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32012H1222(01))

⁶ <http://www.digar.ee/id/nlib-digar:12401>

⁷ European Commission. 2004. Common European principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning. Brussels, Commission of the European Communities.

https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/etv/Information_resources/EuropeanInventory/publications/EC_common_principles_validation_20040303.pdf

⁸ <https://web.archive.org/web/20100717013748/http://www.ut.ee/lykka/164880>

Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020⁹ was the starting point for this goal. Its primary objective was to create learning opportunities that meet the needs and abilities of all Estonians throughout their life, in order to ensure that they have opportunities for dignified self-fulfilment as individuals in society, work and family life.

To date, the assessment of knowledge, skills, and competences acquired in the course of non-formal and informal studies in Estonia has been regulated at the legislative level of formal education. The validation of non-formal and informal learning continues to be prioritised in the education strategy – in the development plan for the Estonian education sector for 2021–2035¹⁰, the further development of the VNIL system is linked to the objective of developing and implementing a sustainable system that takes into account the needs of all target groups in forecasting and monitoring the needs of the workforce and skills and in coordinating activities between different participants in order to support the acquisition of skills that correspond to the needs of the labour market and create a stronger link between education and work.

Development activities related to VNIL have been funded by the Ministry of Education and Research primarily with the support of the European Social Fund (ESF). In the early years of the establishment and implementation of the VNIL system, a number of projects were launched, such as the previously mentioned LÜKKA project. With the support of ESF, the development activities continued mainly within the framework of Primus (2008–2015), the higher education development programme implemented by the Archimedes Foundation (now the Education and Youth Board), while also taking into account vocational education and professional qualifications system development programmes. The development activities of VNIL related to vocational education were also promoted within the framework of the programme 'Kutsehariduse sisuline arendamine 2008–2013' (Development of the content of vocational education), which fell under the responsibility of the National Examination and Qualifications Centre (later known as SA Innove). Since 2015 development activities related to VNIL have been led by the Ministry of Education and Research within the framework of the activity 'Täiskasvanuhariduse edendamise ja õppimisvõimaluste avardamine' (Promoting adult education and expanding learning opportunities)¹¹ funded by the ESF. Development activities will continue in the new programme period (2021–2027) with the support of EU Structural Funds.

As educational institutions are responsible for organising the implementation of VNIL, activities related to VNIL are financed from, among other things, state budgetary support for educational institutions, and in the case of private schools, also from tuition fees. Schools must ensure the development of appropriate terms and procedures, and consistent information and advice for learners, and educational institutions are also responsible for

⁹ <http://www.digar.ee/id/nlib-digar:259547>

¹⁰ Education Strategy 2021–2035 <https://www.hm.ee/ministeerium-uudised-ja-kontakt/ministeerium/strateegilised-alusdokumendid-ja-programmid#haridusvaldkonna-are>

¹¹ <https://www.hm.ee/kutse-ja-taiskasvanuharidus/taiskasvanuharidus/tasuta-kursused>

developing the quality of VNIL and collecting the necessary statistics. A prerequisite for the implementation of these activities is ensuring the availability of staff involved in counselling and organising the work of assessors.

The awarders of profession finance development activities, including development related to VNIL, from the fees imposed on the application for professional qualification. In some professional fields when applying for individual professional qualifications, a separate fee is imposed for the use of VNIL.

1.3 Regulatory framework and implementation of the VNIL system

For the most part, the VNIL system implemented in Estonia is regulated. However, the educational institutions of each level of education (general education, vocational, universities) and the awarders of profession are responsible for organising and promoting the implementation of VNIL, following the European Union's guidelines for validating the quality of non-formal and informal learning. Thus, the organisation of the implementation of VNIL in Estonia is largely sector-based, but the Ministry of Education and Research has a coordinating role in the development activities of VNIL. In implementing VNIL, the organisations responsible ensure that the process is in line with the current legal framework and the recommendations of the European Union on VNIL. The implementation of VNIL has resulted in a certain degree of varying approaches to recognition, and it is challenging for applicants to navigate the rules and processes of different institutions.

VNIL in higher education

The principles of recognition of prior learning and work experience in higher education are regulated by the **higher education standard**¹² established on the basis of the **Higher Education Act**¹³, which provides the principles of recognition, verification and assessment of VNIL. Based on the standard, each higher education institution must establish the terms and procedures for recognition of the students' prior learning and work experience. Thus, there are differences in the terms and procedures for applying for VNIL between higher education institutions, but pursuant to the higher education standard, all higher education institutions must enable the use of VNIL for the following:

- meeting the conditions of admission established by the higher education institution;
- taking into account credits acquired during the course of prior learning during the completion of the curriculum;
- completing the curriculum within the framework of continuing education, recognising the knowledge and skills acquired independently and from work experience as credits.

¹² <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/107102022005>

¹³ <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/115032022005#para3lg4>

However, the assessment and recognition of prior learning and work experience cannot be applied to the completion of a final thesis or examination required to complete the studies.

Higher education institutions may also impose additional terms and conditions on the recognition of prior learning and experience. For example, a higher education institution may have a minimum requirement for maintaining a study place based on the number of credits in one semester, which must be completed, even if some of the credits are recognised under VNIL. There are higher education institutions where the VNIL procedure allows for the limitation of subjects of the curriculum for which VNIL cannot be applied or practical training cannot be recognised.

The statistics of VNIL in higher education (see Table 1)¹⁴ reveal that the results for the 2021/2022 academic year were the highest of the last five years in regard to both the number of learners who used VNIL and the number of credits recognised, although the percentage has remained stable at 7–8% in recent years. The total number of learners in the 2021/2022 academic year was 44,611, so approximately 8% of the total higher education student body used VNIL. On average, 17 ECTS were recognised per student who used VNIL in the 2021/2022 academic year. This volume of studies has remained stable at this level for the past five years. In higher education, around 84% of the total amount of prior learning recognised under VNIL consists of prior formal education courses.

Table 1. VNIL statistics in higher education

<i>academic year</i>	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021	2021/2022
<i>Number of learners who used VNIL</i>	3,374	3,416	3,271	3,360	3,426
<i>Share of total student body (%)</i>	-	-	7%	7%	8%
<i>Number of credits recognised under VNIL</i>	54,604	55,684	51,030	55,501	59,124

VNIL in vocational education

The principles of recognition of prior learning and work experience in vocational education are regulated by the **Standard of Vocational Education**¹⁵ established on the basis of the **Vocational Educational Institutions Act**¹⁶, which provides the principles of recognition, verification and assessment of VNIL in vocational education. Based on the standard, vocational schools must establish the terms and procedures for recognition of the students'

¹⁴ Statistics of VNIL are based on ehis.ee data of the Estonian Education Information System

¹⁵<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/117042019006>

¹⁶ <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/116062020008#para22>

prior learning and work experience in the school's study regulations. Therefore, similarly to higher education institutions, there are minor differences in the rules and procedures for applying VNIL between vocational schools, but pursuant to the Standard of Vocational Education, VNIL can be used in the following:

- meeting school admission requirements;
- completing the curriculum (except passing a vocational examination or final exam), transferring the learning outcomes of previously completed subjects, topics or modules and recognising prior learning or work experience as learning outcomes of a subject, topic or module;
- recognising a vocational examination previously passed upon completion of vocational training as the final vocational or professional qualification examination.

The number of people who have used VNIL in vocational education is lower than in higher education institutions, both in numbers and in terms of proportion. Based on the statistics of VNIL in vocational education (see Table 2)¹⁷, the highest total number of credits (33,985) was recorded in the 2021/2022 academic year, and on average, 27 credits were recognised per learner. The total number of learners in the 2021/2022 academic year was 25,862, so approximately 5% of the total vocational education student body used VNIL. Over the past 10 years the number of learners in vocational education who use VNIL as the average calculated volume of studies has increased, while still lagging behind higher education. Recognition of non-formal learning and work experience in vocational education has increased significantly in terms of the volume of studies recognised under VNIL. While in the 2014/2015 academic year, the recognition of prior learning from formal education accounted for 97%, this figure was 62% by 2021/2022.

Table 2. VNIL statistics in vocational education

<i>academic year</i>	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021	2021/2022
<i>Number of learners who used VNIL</i>	701	1052	1666	1200	1260
<i>Share of total student body (%)</i>	-	-	7%	5%	5%
<i>Number of credits recognised under VNIL</i>	10,872	21,948	29,785	22,944	33,985

¹⁷ Statistics of VNIL are based on ehis.ee data of the Estonian Education Information System

VNIL in general education

In general education, the use of VNIL is regulated by the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act¹⁸, which regulates both the studies of children and young people of compulsory school attendance age, ie internal study, and the studies of adult learners, ie distance learning. Pursuant to law, the school has the right to recognise learning or activities outside the school curriculum provided that it enables the student to achieve learning outcomes defined in the school or individual curriculum. The main difference compared to higher education institutions and vocational schools is that the law does not oblige schools to develop relevant implementing regulations.

In general education institutions, upon completing the curriculum, skills and knowledge acquired through non-formal and informal learning can be recognised in two ways: in achieving the learning outcomes of subjects or courses and as elective subjects.

In recent years, focus on the recognition of non-formal learning outcomes in general education has been increased. In 2021 the Ministry of Education and Research, in cooperation with the European Commission and the international consulting firm ICF, launched a project for the integration of non-formal learning into formal education. The project, 'Noorte edu toetuseks: võimekus lõimida huvihariduses omandatud formaalharidusse' (Supporting youth success: ability to integrate skills and knowledge acquired in extracurricular education into formal education)¹⁹, aims to establish a clear framework for describing the knowledge, skills and experiences acquired through non-formal learning and assessing and recognising the quality of learning in the completion of the curricula of basic schools, secondary schools and vocational training. Results of the project are expected at the end of 2023, including an analysis of the piloting results, guidelines for practicing integration, and recommendations for policy-making and legislative changes.

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning in general education is most widely used and harmonised in adult upper secondary schools and general education schools offering distance learning. The ESF programme 'Täiskasvanuhariduse edendamine ja õppimisvõimaluste avardamine (2015–2023)' focused on developing practices for the implementation of VNIL in adult upper secondary schools. In 2016 a model regulation for the implementation of VNIL was developed by the working group. Based on the results of the working group the procedures of VNIL are described and regulated in all adult upper secondary schools by the regulation of the educational institution. In order to support the schools, a series of training sessions were conducted for adult upper secondary school employees, which focused on both general and assessment-related principles and assessment methods of VNIL.

In addition, the programme focused on further development of the VNIL process and devoted more attention across sectors to the introduction of the quality principle and the

¹⁸ <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/13332410?leiaKehtiv>

¹⁹ <https://www.hm.ee/noorte-edu-toetuseks-voimekuse-arendamine-mitteformaalope-loimimiseks-formaalopega-2021-2023>

implementation of assessment and counselling measures. Applying the VNIL principles in adult upper secondary schools is an important supportive measure to help increase the return of people with low levels of education or disrupted education to formal education. Since 2018 several adult upper secondary schools have merged with vocational schools. Consequently, several vocational schools now also offer general education for adults and are involved in the further development of the implementation of VNIL in general education.

Professional qualifications system

In Estonia, education and the work environment are connected through a professional qualifications system that is regulated by the **Professions Act**.²⁰ The professional qualifications system was created for the development, assessment, recognition, and comparison of competence, regardless of the manner of their acquisition. Therefore, although the process of awarding professional qualification is not regulated by legislation, the principles and ideas of VNIL are largely the basis for awarding professional qualification.

Awarding of professional qualification is the process of assessing the conformity of the competence of an applicant for professional qualification to the competence requirements specified in the professional standard. As a result of the process if conformity is proven a professional certificate is awarded to the applicant. To support the parties, the guide 'VÕTA kutse andmisel' (VNIL in awarding professional qualification)²¹ has been developed, pursuant to which there are several options for the implementation of VNIL:

- recognising the prerequisites for awarding professional qualification, which creates the possibility of and access to the application of professional qualification – VNIL is applied in cases where the applicant lacks, for example, the required level of education, the volume of continuing training completed and/or the prescribed length of employment;
- demonstrating the competencies specified in the professional standard as a whole – in awarding professional qualification, the applicant's assessment considers work experience, further training, sectoral competence and additional professional activities;
- partially verifying competencies specified by the professional standard – the length of work experience and the volume of training completed will be taken into account on a flexible basis;

²⁰ <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/123032015261?leiaKehtiv>

²¹ Johnson, M. (2016). VÕTA kutse andmisel.

<https://vana.kutsekoda.ee/fwk/contenthelper/10618872/10633392>

- revalidation of professional qualification – VNIL principles are applied when it is not practical to reassess previously assessed competencies. The person revalidating their professional qualification does not need to take a test or examination again and the assessment is based on documents.

Institutions awarding professional qualification are responsible for the form and method of assessing the competence of a person, incl procedures for the establishment of activities related to VNIL, regulating the implementation of VNIL as a separate clause in the procedure for awarding professional qualification or in a separately developed VNIL procedure. In the professional qualification system, VNIL is not a separate and independent activity, but rather it is inextricably linked to the awarding of professional qualification. In order for VNIL to be implemented for its intended purpose and within the limits permitted by law, the implementation of VNIL must be organised systemically and in a manner that is clear and understandable to all parties. SA Kutsekoda offers support and counselling to parties for the implementation of VNIL in awarding of professional qualification.

Adult education

The organisation of adult education is regulated by the **Adult Education Act**²² and the **standard of continuing education**.²³ Pursuant to the act, adult education is divided into formal education and continuing education. The organisation of formal education is governed by the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act, the Vocational Educational Institutions Act and the Higher Education Act referred to above. Continuing education is a targeted and organised learning activity conducted on the basis of a curriculum outside of formal education.

The use of VNIL in providing continuing education is not regulated, and the organisers of continuing education are expected to assess the knowledge and skills acquired through the course of the studies at the end of the studies, rather than to recognise prior learning.

The implementation of the Adult Education Act is compulsory for all providers of continuing education if continuing education is financed from state or local government budgets or structural funds. The act also applies to legal persons conducting continuing education who have submitted a notice of economic activity on the training activities.

In the future, the implementation of the principles of VNIL in the framework of adult education may be promoted by the provision of microcredentials and the introduction of related regulations in the Adult Education Act.

²² <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/110062015010?leiaKehtiv>

²³ <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/126062015009?leiaKehtiv>

1.4. Mechanisms for identification, documentation and assessment of learning outcomes.

The validation of non-formal and informal learning is based on the **VNIL principles**²⁴ agreed upon at the state level, which also form the quality criteria for VNIL. Each organisation implementing VNIL must develop regulations for the implementation of VNIL, in compliance with the requirements for intelligibility, traceability and transparency of the process, and must ensure the availability of relevant information.

Table 3. Principles of VNIL.

Principle	Implementing provision
1. VNIL is fit-for-purpose.	1.1 The VNIL process is designed based on the objectives of VNIL.
	1.2 VNIL is uniformly understood by all parties.
2. VNIL is based on the needs of the applicant and is optional for the applicant.	2.1 The VNIL timeframe and other conditions submitted to the applicant are feasible.
	2.2 The institution assessing and recognising prior learning and work experience will ensure that the applicant has the necessary information and access to guidance and counselling.
	2.3 The applicant has the right to appeal, in accordance with the regulation of the educational institution or the procedure, for awarding of professional qualification.
	2.4 The applicant receives feedback at the end of the assessment process.
3. The organisation and methods of VNIL are reliable and based on educational and professional standards and good practices. Trust, which stems from social recognition, well-defined standards and clear information about the assessment process and criteria, plays a central role.	3.1 The tasks and limits of liability of all parties are known and adhered to in the VNIL process.
	3.2 The assessment methods and procedures are purposeful and unambiguous.

²⁴ Ministry of Education and Research. Principles of VNIL.
https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2022-06/v6ta_p6himotted.pdf

	3.3 Assessment of prior learning and work experience is based on evidence. Appropriate assessment methods and clear assessment criteria are used for the assessment.
	3.4 The parties to VNIL ensure the protection of the data submitted for the assessment of prior learning and work experience.
4. Assessors and counsellors are competent, independent and impartial. Independence and impartiality are key factors in the assessment process and are based on the responsibility of the assessors. The roles of assessors and counsellors are clear and defined.	4.1 If necessary, a counsellor will introduce the VNIL procedure to the applicant and provide instructions to the applicant.
	4.2 The assessors are impartial and independent in their decisions.
	4.3 The assessors are familiar with and adhere to the principles of VNIL assessment. The assessor is a professional in the field being assessed.
	4.4 Assessors and counsellors are constantly developing their professional skills.
5. Quality assurance of VNIL is a systematic process based on the principle of continuous improvement.	5.1 Quality assurance of VNIL is part of the educational institution's educational process or the quality assurance system of the awarder of profession.
	5.2 An educational institution or awarder of profession regularly assesses the principles of VNIL, the competence of assessors and counsellors, and the organisation of VNIL.
6. Precise and unambiguous principles of assessment are used in assessing VNIL.	6.1 Knowledge acquired from experience, rather than the existence of the experience, is assessed.

The VNIL process (Figure 1) always includes three parties: **the applicant, counsellor and assessor**. Central activities of the process are: **identification, documentation, assessment and certification** of results. The implementation of VNIL is generally based on the following

process flow diagram²⁵, which takes into account the principles of VNIL, the regulation and the requirements set out in the centrally developed guidance materials. Differences in implementation occur due to the organisation of VNIL, which is specific to each institution.

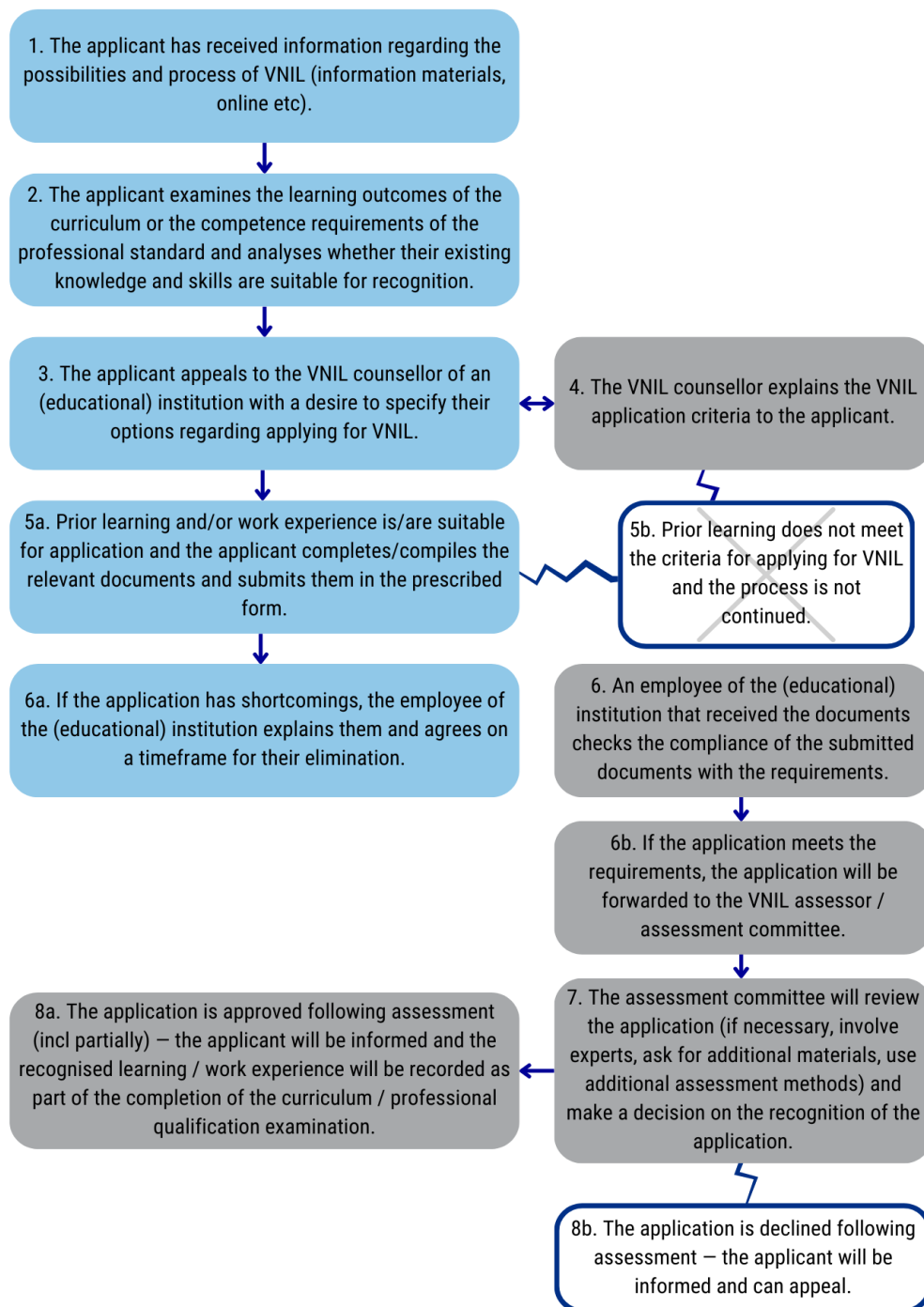


Figure 1. The VNIL process

²⁵ Rutiku, S., Vau, I., Ranne, R. (2011). *VÕTA Varasemate Õpingute ja Töökogemuse Arvestamine. Käsiraamat*. Archimedes Foundation

Identification

The VNIL process as a whole is based primarily on the interests and needs of the applicant, and the prerequisite for the implementation of VNIL is the compatibility of the prior learning content with the curriculum and its learning outcomes, or the competency requirements of the professional standard and the availability of sufficient evidence. Whether the knowledge has been acquired through the course of formal, non-formal or informal studies is irrelevant.

The process is always initiated by a **VNIL applicant** whose task is to acknowledge their acquired skills and knowledge, assess them critically and link them to the learning outcomes of the curriculum or the competency requirements of the professional standard. Educational institutions have VNIL coordinators/counsellors for sharing information related to VNIL and for counselling potential applicants, whereas the awarders of profession perform the role of counsellors in the context of awarding professional qualification.

Documentation

During the application process, the applicant must submit a formal application together with the necessary evidence to the institution implementing VNIL. The applicant is responsible for compiling the evidence, preparing the application, and ensuring the accuracy of the information and documents submitted. The evidence submitted must provide proof to the applicant's competences, their scope and depth.

Generally, knowledge gained in formal education or non-formal education is certified with a diploma, certificate or another document certifying education. Skills and knowledge acquired in informal learning, including through work experience or independent studies, can be proven by presenting completed work, samples, a description of the work experience, a professional certificate or other documents. Credits awarded based on identical or similar curricula (including learning outcomes) in formal education can be transferred within or between educational institutions.

The learners' self-analysis is used for validation of informal learning, which is why guidance material for supporting the self-analysis using the STARR approach²⁶ has been developed for institutions applying VNIL.

Evaluation

In assessing a VNIL application, the results of formal, non-formal and informal learning (incl work experience) are assessed together, whereby one learning method may partially or fully compensate for another²⁷. The following assessment principles are applied in assessing VNIL:

²⁶ Pilli, E., Vau, I. STARR tehnika kasutamine varasemate õpingute ja töökogemuse arvestamisel. https://hm.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2022-06/starr_juhend_loplik.pdf

²⁷ Rutiku, S., Vau, I., Ranne, R. (2011). *VÕTA Varasemate Õpingute ja Töökogemuse Arvestamine. Käsiraamat*. Archimedes Foundation

- knowledge acquired from the experience, rather than the existence of the experience, is assessed;
- in the assessment of prior learning through different methods, including through work experience, compliance with the curriculum or (some of) the learning outcomes thereof or competency requirements of the professional standard is of utmost importance;
- the assessment of prior learning and work experience is based on the principle of comprehensive assessment;
- in the framework of VNIL, applicants will not be assessed more strictly than students in regular studies;
- generally, undifferentiated assessment is used for the assessment of prior learning and work experience. An exception is the recognition of prior learning completed with a formal differentiated assessment, where a comparable assessment system is used as a basis.²⁸

A portfolio, which contains the required evidence, and the applicant's self-analysis (eg work samples, independent work performed in the course of prior learning, recordings of presentations etc), is commonly used for assessment.²⁹

Generally, an assessment committee is formed within an educational institution to assess the VNIL applications, which mainly consists of persons conducting the studies (eg lecturers, teachers, heads of curriculum). Members of the professional qualifications committee and experts in the field (eg employers, representatives of professional associations etc) are involved in awarding professional qualification.

An applicant will receive feedback and information on the decision from the educational institution irregardless of whether the decision is positive or negative, and assessors are obliged to justify their decision.

In the case of a negative decision, the applicant has the opportunity to challenge the decision. Separate statistics on declined VNIL applications are not collected at the state level.

Generally, only the original performance can be used as the basis for recognition of prior learning and work experience, which is why the transfer of an earlier VNIL decision cannot be applied for. An exception is national vocational education curricula, which do not vary between educational institutions (eg secondary vocational education) and regarding which the VNIL committee of one educational institution may recognise the decision of the VNIL committee of another educational institution.

²⁸ Rutiku, S., Vau, I., Ranne, R. (2011). *VÕTA Varasemate Õpingute ja Töökogemuse Arvestamine. Käsiraamat*. Archimedes Foundation

²⁹ Pilli, E. (2008). *Hindaja juhend: VÕTA Varasemate Õpingute ja Töökogemuse Arvestamine*. Tartu

Certification of results

The assessment results related to VNIL are certified with the graduation documents issued in formal education or professional certificates. For the purposes of transparency, the subjects or modules recognised under VNIL are marked 'recognised on the basis of prior learning' on the academic transcript issued upon completion of higher education. On the grade reports issued upon completion of vocational education, modules completed through informal and non-formal learning are marked as 'recognised on the basis of VNIL'.

In Estonia, subjects, modules and qualifications completed through informal and/or non-formal learning, and skills and knowledge recognised under VNIL are considered equivalent to those acquired through formal studies.

In general education, the graduation documents do not directly reflect the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. A school for general education may recognise skills and knowledge acquired through non-formal or informal learning as studies or activities outside the curriculum, either by assessing them using the conventional five-point system or as an elective, marking the result as 'passed' or 'failed'.

1.5. Making the skills and knowledge acquired through open digital learning resources or learning mobility visible

Pursuant to the recommendation of the Council of the European Union and in order to support learning mobility and the free movement of labour in Europe, the VNIL process is also used to recognise skills and knowledge acquired through non-formal and informal learning in other countries. The Estonian VNIL practice equates skills and knowledge acquired via learning mobility or open digital learning resources with the recognition of those acquired through non-formal and informal learning, and the same rules for the implementation of VNIL apply. In the recognition of skills and knowledge acquired, the compatibility of their content with the curriculum and its learning outcomes or the professional standard and competency requirements, the availability of evidence and, if necessary, self-analysis are important. Currently, separate statistics on the recognition of skills and knowledge acquired through e-learning under VNIL are not being collected.

Studies in higher education institutions and vocational schools involve participation in collaborative projects and learning mobility in other EU countries. Generally, this is related to the opportunities offered through the Erasmus+ programme. The Erasmus+ programme guide³⁰ provides for the recognition of skills and knowledge acquired through learning mobility, including non-formal and informal learning, predominantly through the use of learning mobility certificates. In vocational education, VNIL is most commonly used for the recognition of practical training or internship completed abroad.

³⁰ <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/document/erasmus-programme-guide-2023-version-3-040423>

2. Scope of implementation of VNIL or qualifications acquired with VNIL

2.1 Qualifications acquired through the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

In Estonia, VNIL can be used in acquiring both formal education and professional qualifications. It can also be used in the acquisition of a partial profession, which is a part of a professional qualification that can be described and assessed independently.

Since 2008 an 8-level qualification framework has been in place in Estonia, covering both formal education and professional qualifications.

The Estonian qualifications framework consists of four sub-frameworks (Figure 2), each of which has learning outcomes described for each level:

- the learning outcomes of general education qualifications are described in the national curricula of basic and secondary schools;
- the learning outcomes of vocational education are described in the Standard of Vocational Education;
- the learning outcomes of higher education levels (professional higher education, bachelor's, master's and doctoral studies) are described by the higher education standard;
- the competency requirements for professional qualifications are described in professional standards.

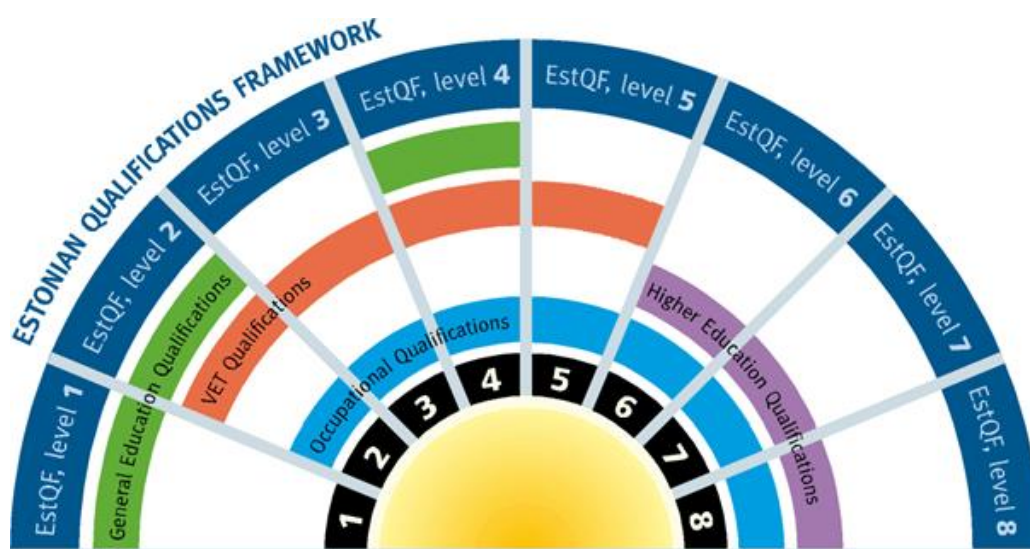


Figure 2. Estonian qualifications framework

Descriptions of the levels of the qualifications framework define the general requirements for learning outcomes of the educational system and professional qualifications of the professional qualifications system. Vocational and higher education qualifications are

described in the curricula as learning outcomes, general education qualifications as learning results, and professional qualifications of professional standards as competencies. This approach creates the prerequisites for the implementation of VNIL, because assessing skills and knowledge acquired previously through various methods, including through work experience, their compliance with the learning outcomes / learning results of the curriculum or part(s) thereof or the competency requirements of the professional standard is of utmost importance.

The European Credits System (ECTS)³¹ is used in higher education and the ECVET³²-compliant Estonian vocational education credit point system is used in vocational education to better understand the scope of learning or work related to the learning outcomes / learning results. In general education, a course-based system is used, in which 1 course equates to learning units of 35 academic hours (1 academic hour = 45 minutes).

Legislation does not limit the volume of studies that can be recognised under VNIL in the acquisition of formal education qualifications, but educational institutions themselves can set certain restrictions on the implementation of VNIL in the completion of the curriculum. For example, there may be subjects in the curriculum that cannot be recognised under VNIL pursuant to the school's established VNIL procedure. Such restrictions are more of an exception rather than a rule.

The assessment and recognition of prior learning and work experience cannot be applied to the completion of a final thesis or an examination required to complete studies in vocational and higher education. However, a vocational examination previously taken outside of studies can be recognised under VNIL as a final vocational or professional examination required for the completion of vocational education.

In general education, VNIL cannot be used to pass final exams of basic school and state examinations of secondary school, as these are conditions for graduation from basic and secondary school. A school examination and student research or practical work, which also form part of the conditions for graduation from a secondary school, may be recognised if the school examination has already been taken and the student has defended the student research or practical work.

In the awarding of professional qualification, non-formal and informal learning can be recognised as competencies provided in the professional standard either in part or in whole. Non-formal and informal learning also play an important role in the revalidation of professional qualification. Since the awarding of professional qualification constitutes an assessment of competencies that can be acquired in very different ways, the awarders of profession have prepared assessment standards which also create the prerequisites for the recognition of informal and non-formal learning. At the same time, there is currently no uniform and

³¹ The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

³² European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training

systematic approach to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning among the awarders of profession, although in the most cases an opportunity for this has been created in the procedures for awarding professional qualification and the awarders of profession find that this opportunity is also used if necessary. Unfortunately, there are no official statistics on this, and perceptions and implementation vary among the awarders of profession.

2.2 VNIL in entering formal education

In both higher and vocational education, VNIL can be applied for in Estonia as an alternative entry process for meeting the admission conditions set by the educational institution, but in practice this is not widely applied. VNIL may be used to meet the prerequisites for admission if the admission is conditional upon passing prerequisite courses or having professional experience in the relevant field. VNIL is also used if prior learning was not completed and the person wishes to continue their studies in the same or another educational institution.

In adult upper secondary schools, VNIL is used to meet the admission conditions as well as to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of the student (to determine the correct entry point). Thus, adults without formal education qualifications in distance learning may shorten their period of study by passing only the subjects they are missing and the necessary examinations they need to qualify at the given level.

Exceptions may be made if skills and knowledge acquired at a lower level of study are recognised at a higher level of study (eg whether the skills and knowledge acquired in a vocational school may be recognised in professional higher education under VNIL).

3. Connections between the implementation of VNIL and other tools that support transparency and recognition

Several different tools/frameworks for increasing transparency initiated by the European Union (eg following learning outcomes, qualifications framework, harmonised validation principles, forms, environments etc) have helped and contribute to the implementation of VNIL in Estonia. The implementation of VNIL is also supported by the Europass environment.

Europass tools also support the recognitions of skills and knowledge acquired through learning mobility. The Estonian Agency for Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps of the Education and Youth Board support the use of the Europass learning mobility certificates for learning mobility in the framework of the Erasmus+ programme. In 2018–2022, 5,319 Europass learning mobility certificates were issued (see Table 4).

Table 4. Learning mobility certificates issued³³

Year	Number of learning mobility certificates	Notes
2018	1,427	
2019	1,335	
2020	490	Covid-19
2021	586	Covid-19
2022	1,481	

The European Union's Youthpass initiative is intended to support young people in making the skills and knowledge they have acquired through non-formal and informal learning visible. Youthpass is both a certificate of participation and acquisition of skills and knowledge in a project or training, as well as a process that supports the conscious learning of the participants (young people and youth workers) and giving meaning to, analysing, and describing the knowledge.³⁴ This is a widely used tool by young people and youth workers alike. The Education and Youth Board coordinating Erasmus+ programmes also guides people to use the Youthpass. The use of the Youthpass creates an opportunity to document the learning outcomes, which can be used in the future as evidence for VNIL if necessary.

4. Supporting Individuals in using VNIL

4.1 VNIL counselling

In addition to application and assessment, counselling is one of three key activities in the VNIL process, which aims to help the applicant better understand and demonstrate what they know and are capable of, and how it fits into a specific curriculum or professional standard. According to the principles of VNIL, counsellors must be competent, impartial and independent.

The bodies implementing VNIL will ensure that the applicant is provided with the necessary information, guidance and advice. Information related to VNIL is published on the educational institution's website, either by referring to specific documents (eg the VNIL procedure) or by redirecting the user to separate sub-pages that explain in more detail the procedures related to VNIL. In vocational schools, higher education institutions and adult upper secondary schools, it is common to inform learners about the possibilities of VNIL by email and also to

³³ Statistics on learning mobility certificates issued, based on data from the National Europass Centre. <https://www.kutsekoda.ee/europassi-keskus-2/>

³⁴ Centre of Youth Programmes of Estonian Agency for Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps <https://euroopanooored.eu/kvaliteet/noortepass/>

organise briefings on the topic of VNIL. In many educational institutions, more attention is paid to introducing the possibilities of VNIL during the admissions or induction period.

Similarly to educational institutions, many awarders of profession organise information days related to professional qualification application. The awarders of profession are responsible for organising counselling related to professional qualification applications, including VNIL. Information related to professional qualification application is available on the websites of the awarders of profession. This includes the necessary instructions, forms, etc.

The state also would like to raise awareness of the opportunities VNIL presents and to facilitate the availability of information related to VNIL. In addition to the website³⁵ of the ministry, information on the youth sector, education, training and career counseling, and sectors connecting the labour market to learning has been concentrated in one central, learner-friendly web portal, **Haridusportaal** (Education Portal)³⁶. In 2020 a subpage on VNIL was added,³⁷ which provides an overview of the use of VNIL for learners in higher education and vocational schools as well as adults in general education. The page also includes videos on VNIL aimed at potential applicants in Estonian, English and Russian, as well as a section for frequently asked questions.

The videos are part of the e-learning materials ordered by MER that aim to help give an overview of all the main VNIL topics, so that the applicant is better prepared for the VNIL application process. The study materials also include self-check questions that support the acquisition of information. E-learning materials are available to applicants through MER, Haridusportaal, and E-school bag. In addition, several schools also distribute materials to applicants.

Making the skills and knowledge acquired in the field of youth work visible is supported by the online environment www.mitteformaalne.ee, coordinated by the Education and Youth Board (formerly the Archimedes Foundation) and the training and development activities for youth workers included on the website. The environment brings together learning materials and methods to help promote non-formal and informal learning among young people, to raise awareness on the need to recognise the skills and knowledge acquired and the relevant opportunities, including the Youthpass. The portal is well known among youth workers in Estonia.

4.2. Supporting socially disadvantaged target groups

The recommendation of the Council of Europe of 20 December 2012 on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning emphasises the need to recognise prior learning and work experience, primarily among socioeconomically disadvantaged or low-skilled people. The VNIL

³⁵ <https://www.hm.ee/kutse-ja-taiskasvanuharidus/taiskasvanuharidus/vota>

³⁶ www.haridusportaal.edu.ee

³⁷ <https://haridusportaal.edu.ee/artiklid/v%C3%B5ta#v%C3%B5ta-p%C3%B5him%C3%B5tted>

system created in Estonia is a tool for formally recognising the knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired at different times, by different methods, and in different places by persons who may have encountered varying levels of difficulties in accessing education and the labour market, whether the obstacles lie in admission conditions, lack of funds or adapted teaching materials / work environment etc.

Consequently, the activities of the Ministry of Education and Research's adult education programme are directed towards the development of the VNIL system and the training of counsellors and assessors.³⁸ As the programme's activities were targeted at adults who had interrupted their studies and who have low levels of education, the programme's activities focused on raising awareness of adult upper secondary school staff, because adults who had previously interrupted their studies in general education make up the majority of the students in adult upper secondary schools.

The initial counselling on VNIL is carried out in all adult upper secondary schools in the course of the admission interview or when submitting documents – the admission process also reveals whether and to what extent it is possible to apply for VNIL.

However, cases of recognising prior learning in formal education are predominate in adult upper secondary schools, whereas recognition of informal and non-formal learning is less common in general education. In addition to the bottlenecks, the survey conducted by the Ministry of Education and Research at the end of 2017 also revealed that the implementation of VNIL raises the learner's self-esteem and motivation – the learner gets a positive acknowledgment of their skills and knowledge acquired in the work environment, self-analysis highlights the learner's strengths, they can better perceive their future opportunities, and it gives them a feeling of success that makes it easier to move forward in formal education.³⁹

The Ministry of Education and Research has also funded projects of adult upper secondary schools with the support of the European Social Fund in the framework of the call for proposals 'Madala haridustasemega täiskasvanute tagasitoomine tasemekoolitusse ja õppes osalemise toetamine' (Returning adults with low levels of education to formal education and supporting participation in learning). For example, a total of 18 projects were funded between 2018–2020, which supported the return of adults, whose education was disrupted, to primary and general secondary education and the successful completion of their studies. The projects provided special support measures for vulnerable target groups, such as courses developing learning skills and abilities, supplemental and bridge courses in key subjects, learner counselling and individual guidance. Targeted outreach was used to raise awareness of learning opportunities among adults of vulnerable target groups etc.

³⁸ https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/9_taiskasvanuhariduse_programmi_2017-2020_eelnou_1.pdf

³⁹ Ministry of Education and Research (2018). VÕTA rakendamine täiskasvanute gümnaasiumides 2017/18

On the initiative of the Ministry of Education and Research, a number of campaigns have been carried out over the years (eg Jälle kooli⁴⁰, the TULE programme⁴¹), which have been aimed at inviting people to complete their interrupted formal education or to continue their professional studies. The application of VNIL supports the implementation of such initiatives.

In Estonia, so-called skills audits are not carried out in specially designed centres. Both employed and registered unemployed persons receive support from the Unemployment Insurance Fund, whose offices are located in every county of Estonia, thus ensuring local counselling in all regions. For example, the Unemployment Insurance Fund's services offer support to young people entering working life, for people who have been away from working life for an extended period of time upon returning to work, and for workers who need support to stay in the workplace due to a lack of skills or the reduced ability to work. The role of the counsellors of the Unemployment Insurance Fund is to assess the person's prior level of education and acquired skills (including work experience), recommending further steps accordingly and introducing various services that support the person. The latter includes introducing the possibilities of VNIL in continuing studies, (re-)commencement of studies or applying for professional qualification. The online environment Minu Karjäär (My Career) developed by the Unemployment Insurance Fund assists in mapping prior learning, experience gained and personal needs.⁴²

Career counsellors at the Unemployment Insurance Fund provide career counselling to both unemployed and employed persons, covering topics related to studies, workplace and career choice. The Unemployment Insurance Fund guides people to acquire basic and/or secondary education and also offers support for participation in formal education.

4.3 Affordability of using VNIL for the applicant

As a rule, VNIL is free of charge for the learner in formal education. Vocational schools and schools for general education do not apply additional fees for the use of VNIL. However, several higher education institutions have established a price list for the processing of VNIL applications, the conditions of which vary between universities and are based on the status of the student and the details of the application. For example, the fee may be calculated separately for the processing of the application and the amount of credits and the fee may be charged only to external students. Another common practice is transferring credits from the same school or the knowledge gained from continuing education free of charge. The fee rates are symbolic (for example, 10 euros per 1 ECTS). In private universities where studies are subject to a fee, a fee is also applied to the use of VNIL. Terms and conditions on the fees

⁴⁰ <https://jallekooli.ee/>

⁴¹ Must, O.; Must, A.; Täht, K. (2015) Programmi TULE uuringu 'Haridustee valikud ning õpingute katkestamise asjaolud Eesti Kõrghariduses' aruanne. University of Tartu. https://dspace.ut.ee/bitstream/handle/10062/49551/Haridustee_valikud_opingute_katkestamise_asjaolud_korghariduses.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y

⁴² <https://minukarjaar.ee/et>

applicable to VNIL applications will be set by each higher education institution in accordance with the relevant regulation of the VNIL procedure.

In the context of the professional system, processing of VNIL applications is usually included in the price of applying for the professional qualification, but the awarder of profession may set a separate price for processing applications under VNIL.

The affordability of using VNIL has as such not been researched. However, given that in both general and vocational education and also in part in higher education institutions, it is free of charge for the applicant, it can be assumed that VNIL is rather affordable.

The availability of VNIL is likely to be affected primarily by the distribution of the relevant information and the scope and quality of consultation. The quality of publishing and systematic sharing of information related to VNIL varies from school to school. Since the responsibility for the use of VNIL as the initiator of the process lies with the applicant, the motivation, analytical skills, and willingness of people to present evidence are also decisive factors. The more competent authorities are able to support it, the more people's skills and knowledge acquired in different ways will be recognised through VNIL.

Statistics⁴³ reveal that the recognition of credits for prior learning or formal studies is more common than the recognition of work experience or other continuing education (non-formal learning) and/or experience (informal learning) acquired in spare time, which is recognised far less.

5. Role of stakeholders in the implementation of VNIL

The most important stakeholders in the implementation of VNIL are educational institutions in higher, vocational and general education, since in Estonia, VNIL is most often implemented in formal education. Competent authorities are responsible for developing their VNIL procedures and regulations and for publishing information, including submitting data in accordance with the VNIL principles agreed upon in Estonia, the principles set out in the educational standards and in the recommendations of the European Union.

The Ministry of Education and Research plays an important central role, coordinating the implementation of VNIL at the national and legislative level. The ministry has been responsible for a number of important projects intended to launch the development activities necessary for the implementation of VNIL. As a result, required legislative changes have also been created and implemented. Various national development activities related to VNIL have also been continued and educational institutions' initiatives supported (training, seminars, study tours, webinars etc) with the help of the European Social Fund.

⁴³ Statistics of VNIL are based on the data of the Estonian Education Information System ehis.ee

Although one of the objectives of the LÜKKA project and the Primus programme was to create a cooperation network between educational institutions for the further development of the VNIL system, following the end of the large-scale projects, it ceases to function. In the last ten years, MER has played a leading role in the network's activities. VNIL counsellors and coordinators at vocational schools, higher education institutions and adult upper secondary schools are members of the network. The network's seminars are attended actively and the members of the network value both the support received from the network and the centrally organised trainings.

MER has played a leading role in the implementation of VNIL in supporting general education schools that offer distance learning, especially adult upper secondary schools. At present, the ministry focuses on creating a good and simple framework for describing the knowledge, skills and experience acquired through non-formal learning, and for assessing and recognising the quality of what has been learnt when completing the curricula of basic schools, secondary schools and vocational education.

Plans to implement a reform of the professional qualification system are also in place for the coming years, the goal of which is to create a more seamless connection between education and work. In cooperation with **social partners, SA Kutsekoda** and MER are developing a complete system of skills description, forecasting and recognition (the OsKus system), which includes service and analysis environments that create better prerequisites for presenting and recognising the skills and knowledge acquired through various methods. The digital solutions created will become a practical tool for people making decisions on work and learning, employers, trainers, curricula creators and supporters of learning and career development.

As an institution organising the development of the professional qualification system, SA Kutsekoda coordinates, among other things, the work of the **awards of profession**, while also supporting activities related to the implementation of VNIL in the process of applying for professional qualification. The awards of profession are responsible for the implementation of VNIL. Professional qualifications are usually awarded by various professional associations, sectoral umbrella organisations that act as non-profit associations or foundations, as well as vocational schools and higher education institutions, for example. **Entrepreneurs** participating both in the process of preparing professional standards and as assessors in the process of applying for professional qualification are involved through the activities of the Estonian Qualifications Authority and the awards of profession. Educational institutions also involve entrepreneurs in certain fields of study in the VNIL assessment process. Their role will be even greater in implementing the skills recognition process planned in the course of the professional qualification system reform.

The National Europass Centre, which supports the use of Europass resources within the framework of VNIL, as well as the European Qualifications Framework Contact Point (NCP), which helps to increase awareness of the qualifications framework, also operate under the Estonian Qualifications Authority.

Although **the Unemployment Insurance Fund** itself is not an institution implementing VNIL, the career advisers of the Unemployment Insurance Fund play an important role in counselling people on their careers, and guiding them either to complete their formal studies or to start professional studies, if necessary. In doing so, they contribute to general awareness of the possibilities of VNIL and also guide people to use these opportunities.

Several organisations within the field of education have contributed to the implementation of VNIL, after the Ministry of Education and Research has involved them in managing initiated projects/programmes or specific development activities. For example, the Archimedes Foundation (now the **Education and Youth Board**) coordinated the Primus programme for higher education. The Innove Foundation (now the Education and Youth Board) supported the development of VNIL in vocational schools and prepared guidance material for the implementation of VNIL in general education. Various organisations offering extracurricular education as well as youth work are increasingly involved in the developments in general education.

An important public sector organisation involved in promoting youth work is the Centre of Youth Programmes of Estonian Agency for Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps, which is now also part of the Education and Youth Board (formerly the Archimedes Foundation). The Centre for Educational Programmes also operates under the agency. These centres support both youth and adult learning mobility, development of the education and youth sector, international cooperation, and projects contributing to youth participation and society. The popularisation of the Youthpass and other tools that increase transparency will also be promoted.

6. Enhancing the operational capacity and quality assurance of parties involved in VNIL

6.1 Supporting counsellors and assessors

Competence of counsellors and assessors is one of the quality criteria of VNIL – they must be **competent, independent and impartial** and consistently develop their professional skills to meet this criteria. In larger educational institutions, seminars for counsellors and assessors are usually organised once per semester or academic year, reviewing processes related to VNIL and discussing solutions to bottlenecks and updates. Individual educational institutions organise internal training for counsellors and instructors.

At the same time, educational institutions are happy to use the opportunity to refer VNIL advisers to the trainings and seminars offered by the Ministry of Education and Research, organised within the framework of the ESF-supported activities 'Täiskasvanuhariduse edendamise ja õppimisvõimaluste avardamine (2015–2023)'. Since 2015 various training courses on the general principles of VNIL, counselling and assessment have been organised for adult upper secondary schools, higher education institutions, vocational schools and

awarders of profession. Feedback from schools reveals that the counsellors in educational institutions also value the support received from the cooperation seminars of the VNIL network organised by the ministry and the information that is exchanged there. The purpose of the network meetings is to encourage and promote the introduction of developments related to VNIL, the sharing of experiences, dissemination of good practices, establishment of new connections and development of cooperation across all levels of education. In recent years, the network's outputs have proved to be a great support for vocational schools, as from 2019 onwards a number of vocational schools also provide adults with the opportunity to complete basic and general secondary education. However, this means that they have had to review the principles related to the implementation of VNIL and organise the relevant processes in accordance with the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act.

Interactive e-learning materials (e-courses), which are aimed at counsellors, applicants and assessors, have been created under the leadership of the ministry.⁴⁴ The usability of e-learning materials has increased, but currently some educational institutions have yet to put them into everyday use. The separate VNIL subpage of the education portal, which includes all existing materials on VNIL and a frequently asked questions section, are also great resources for counsellors and assessors.

Competent assessors and counsellors also greatly contribute to the credibility of the VNIL process in the context of awarding professional qualification. In the process of awarding professional qualification, counselling mostly involves the awarders of profession providing information to the applicants. Many awarders of profession consider it very important that assessors undergo professional development and training. Discussions between assessors both before assessment (negotiating important aspects of assessment, informing new assessors) and after assessment (summarising assessment, sharing experiences, planning improvement activities) have become good practice.⁴⁵

6.2 Development of the assessment infrastructure

The Ministry of Education and Research coordinates the implementation of VNIL at the state and legislative level. The ministry has been responsible for projects intended to launch the development activities necessary for the implementation of VNIL and has made the necessary legislative amendments.

Since 2018 VNIL documents (including applications, assessment materials etc) have been processed in the study information system TAHVEL, which is used by all of the country's vocational schools, colleges, as well as adult upper secondary schools that have been merged with vocational schools. The functionalities of universities' study information systems also support the submission and assessment of VNIL applications. TAHVEL and universities' study

⁴⁴ <https://e-koolikott.ee/et/search?q=V%C3%95TA&lang=est&minAdded=2009&maxAdded=2023>

⁴⁵ Johnson, M. (2016). VÕTA kutse andmisel.

<https://vana.kutsekoda.ee/fwk/contenthelper/10618872/10633392>

information systems are interfaced with the Estonian education information system EHIS, which provides statistics on the use of VNIL.

From 2022 the e-administrative environment for applying for professional qualification intended for vocational schools has been in use, and development plans to extend it include the application of 'world of work' professional qualification, which would make it easier for adults to apply for validation of their skills through the awarding of professional qualification.

However, according to feedback from both educational institutions and learners, the online environment for applying for VNIL needs to be developed further for it to be convenient, easy to use and understandable for applicants as well as VNIL counsellors and assessors.

Plans are in place to use the European Union Structural Funds 2021–2027 to promote flexible learning methods, ie increasing opportunities for the use of VNIL in the education and professional qualifications system. The skills information system will be expanded with the possibility of compiling personal skill profiles, which will support the recognition of prior learning through VNIL, either by educational institutions or awarders of profession. The classification of skills will be updated, descriptions or skills will be harmonised in professional qualifications databases, and the above will be linked to the European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO) classification.

6.3 Quality assurance of the VNIL system

Quality assurance of VNIL is a systematic process based on the principle of continuous improvement. The VNIL quality criteria are the VNIL principles described above (see page 12), on the basis of which each competent authority will organise the quality assurance of VNIL based on its own specifics, practices, quality management system etc. Quality assurance related to the implementation of VNIL will form an integral part of the approach to and management of quality of educational institutions and awarders of profession.⁴⁶

The principle of quality assurance of VNIL means collecting regular feedback from different parties, analysing the information received, and planning improvement activities; based on the objectives of the institution regarding VNIL, collecting statistics on VNIL, defining performance metrics, monitoring the performance of such metrics and, accordingly, planning improvement activities; monitoring the performance of the improvement measures taken. VNIL quality assurance is part of the quality assurance system of an educational institution or awarder of profession, in which the competence of the VNIL principles, counsellors and assessors and the organisation of VNIL are regularly assessed.⁴⁷ The organisation and methods of VNIL are reliable and based on educational and professional standards and good

⁴⁶ Rutiku, S., Vau, I., Ranne, R. (2011). *VÕTA Varasemate Õpingute ja Töökogemuse Arvestamine. Käsiraamat*. Archimedes Foundation

⁴⁷ Johnson, M. (2016). *VÕTA kutse andmisel*.
<https://vana.kutsekoda.ee/fwk/contenthelper/10618872/10633392>

practices. Trust, which stems from social recognition, well-defined standards and clear information about the assessment process and criteria, plays a central role.

In regard to VNIL, the frequency and thoroughness of quality assessment in educational institutions varies. In educational institutions, the most common practice is reviewing documents governing VNIL, including the VNIL procedure, at least once a year. The most commonly used methods for updating the documents governing VNIL and mapping out bottlenecks and improvement proposals include gathering feedback from learners, alumni and employees, as well as organising development seminars within the institution. Based on the collected proposals, required changes are made to the VNIL processes.

7. Assessment and supervision

In Estonia, educational institutions and awarders of profession have great freedom, but also great responsibility in terms of VNIL implementation. Since VNIL quality assurance is an integral part of the educational process of educational institutions and the quality assurance system of awarders of profession, it is closely linked to the quality assurance and supervision of both general, vocational and higher education as well as to the awarding of professional qualification.

A separate assessment of developments and impacts related to the implementation of the VNIL system has not been developed at the state level. The assessment of the VNIL systems of higher education institutions and vocational schools is carried out in an integrated manner during the course of the assessment of the quality of education, which is organised by the Estonian Quality Agency for Education (HAKA).

In Estonia, only higher education institutions that have passed assessment of education quality or institutional accreditation may provide higher education. Institutional accreditation is an external assessment in which the compliance of the university's management, organisation of work, educational and research activities, and the educational and research environment with legislation, objectives of the university, and development plans is assessed.⁴⁸

The assessment by HAKA is carried out by independent assessors from outside the educational institution, and is based on an internal assessment in which one of the aspects reviewed is the VNIL procedure in place within the educational institution, its governing documents and feedback from various parties. Assessment reports are available on the HAKA website.⁴⁹ However, the coverage of VNIL in assessment reports varies both in scope and content.

⁴⁸ Estonian Quality Agency for Education. *Kõrghariduse kvaliteedi hindamine*.

<https://haka.ee/korgkoolile/korghariduse-valishindamine-eestis/>

⁴⁹ https://wd.archimedes.ee/?page=ekka_search_dynobj&tid=94722&u=20150610134521&desktop=10016

In vocational education, a quality assessment must be carried out at least once every six years for every study programme group that the school has the right to organise studies for an unspecified term. Quality assessment is a formative assessment aimed at supporting the development of a learning-oriented school culture and improving the credibility of vocational education.⁵⁰ If a school has the right to organise studies in a study programme group for a specified term, a reassessment must be passed in order to gain the right for an unspecified term. The Ministry of Education and Research has granted the Estonian Quality Agency for Education the right to organise initial and repeated assessments and quality assessments in vocational education.

Quality management in general education is based on internal assessment and is compulsory for educational institutions. The general objective of internal assessment is to support learner development.

The tasks of the Estonian Qualifications Authority in ensuring the quality of the activities related to the awarding of professional qualification are as follows:

- assessment of compliance with legal requirements in organising awarding professional qualification;
- development and approval of a common methodology for awarding professional qualification;
- analysis of the expediency of the process of applying for the rights of an awardee of profession and the process of awarding professional qualification;
- assessment of the legality and purposefulness of the costs associated with awarding professional qualification.

A prerequisite for the performance of the tasks and quality assurance of the Estonian Qualifications Authority is the availability of feedback on the functioning of processes and activities. Feedback is collected with the purpose of advising awarders of profession on issues related to awarding professional qualification and to propose improvements in the process of awarding professional qualification and further development work.

Over the years, both the Ministry of Education and Research and Innove (now the Education and Youth Board) have conducted surveys related to the implementation of VNIL. The results of the latter have primarily been the basis for the planning of training and development activities related to VNIL and for promoting networking.

Statistics related to the use of VNIL are also collected nationwide by higher education and vocational education institutions using the Estonian Education Information System (EHIS). Educational institutions are obliged to enter the relevant data into EHIS.

⁵⁰ Estonian Quality Agency for Education. *Kutsehariduse kvaliteedi hindamine*. <https://haka.ee/kutsekoolile/hindamine/>

The Ministry of Education and Research periodically carries out thematic supervision of educational institutions, focusing on one specific topic across educational institutions. In relation to the recognition of prior learning and work experience, thematic supervision in educational institutions is planned for 2024.

Summary conclusions

For the most part, the recommendations of the Council of the European Union in 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning are implemented in Estonia. All persons can demonstrate knowledge and skills (competencies) acquired both through the formal education system and through non-formal and informal learning, and can use them in the acquisition of formal educational qualifications as well as professional qualifications, including partial profession. The generally applied principle requires that the content of prior learning and experience must comply with the curriculum and the learning outcomes thereof or competencies of the professional standard, and sufficient evidence must be submitted to implement VNIL. Skills and knowledge acquired from learning mobility and/or open digital learning resources do not form an exception.

The VNIL implemented in Estonia is governed by national legislation. The concept, objectives and principles of VNIL have been defined and all institutions implementing VNIL adhere to them. The implementation of VNIL is based on the elements outlined in the recommendation of the Council of the European Union – identification, documentation, assessment and certification. VNIL is implemented primarily by educational institutions of general, vocational, and higher education and awarders of profession.

Although the institutions are aware of the principles and objectives of VNIL, there are differences in the implementation of VNIL at both the sectoral and institutional level. Therefore, it may be difficult for an applicant to understand the rules and processes related to VNIL within the various institutions. As educational institutions and awarders of profession are responsible for organising, promoting and assuring the quality of the implementation of VNIL, the challenge is to ensure consistency and comprehensibility between the VNIL rules and the transparency of the recognition process.

Pursuant to the VNIL principles followed in Estonia, VNIL quality assurance is part of the educational institution's educational process or the quality assurance system of the awarder of profession. However, the practices of quality assurance and development vary between institutions implementing VNIL. Estonia needs to develop a comprehensive monitoring system for assessing validation results and practices, thereby strengthening the monitoring mechanism.

So far, stakeholder agreements and coordination of development activities have been based on promoting the implementation of VNIL particularly in the formal education system and in the awarding of professional qualification. Although one of the objectives of the LÜKKA project related to VNIL and the Primus programme was to create a cooperation network

between educational institutions for the further development of the VNIL system, following the end of the large-scale projects, it ceases to function. Therefore, in the last ten years the Ministry of Education and Research has assumed the role of leader and organiser of the network. Initiatives at the central level, however, may not adequately reflect the needs of VNIL applicants or the actual preparedness and opportunities of implementing institutions to implement developments in the system. In the future, the planning of new initiatives would be enhanced by having a statistically more complete overview of the usability of VNIL compared to what we have now.

Educational institutions and awarders of profession have so far been the most involved in the development and implementation of the VNIL system. In particular, public sector organisations (foundations) that operate in the fields of education, youth work or professional activity have been involved in the development activities of VNIL. Not as many private sector representatives, third sector education organisations and youth associations are involved. Private providers of continuing education, who can operate in both the private and third sectors, are also not involved. Low involvement of the private sector means that VNIL is primarily accessible for applicants in formal education, and awareness of the possibilities of recognising informal learning among private sector courses is low. This, in turn, could potentially reduce the number of individuals who are able to validate their skills and knowledge acquired from non-formal or informal education, in order to have their competencies recognised.

However, the development activities described in the report regarding recognition of non-formal and informal learning in general education as well as preparation for the regulation of microqualifications suggest an increasing involvement of third sector organisations (youth associations, NGOs) and the private sector (training firms).

Coordinating further developments in VNIL and establishing practices in a way that it is related to and implemented with all the parties in the education sector (including training), the labour market and the third sector is the objective which Estonia is striving to achieve. The need to move towards fulfilling this objective and involving representatives from different sectors is also highlighted in the summary 'European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018' by CEDEFOP, the European Commission, and ICF unifying national reports.⁵¹ In Estonia, this requires more systematic involvement and coordination of labour market representatives, education and youth associations belonging to the third sector and providers of continuing education in the private sector. It is the involvement of private and third sector representatives that is key in moving towards the implementation of broad and cross-sectoral validation practices.

⁵¹ Cedefop, European Commission, ICF. (2019). European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update: Synthesis report. http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/european_inventory_validation_2018_synthesis.pdf

An additional challenge in ensuring the continuity and development of the VNIL system is the continuity of financing related to validation. Estonia is one of the countries where development activities related to VNIL have been primarily financed by the support of European Union Structural Funds. As of now, there is no overview of the extent to which and the methods by which institutions implementing VNIL also contribute from their own budgets. Solving the financing issues related to VNIL requires additional information and a more comprehensive system analysis.

Sources cited

Adult Education Act RT I, 19.03.2019, 93. <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/119032019093>

Adult Education Programme 2017–2020. https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/9_taiskasvanuhariduse_programmi_2017-2020_eelnou_1.pdf

Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act RT I, 11.03.2023, 74. <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/111032023074>

Cedefop (2004). Common European Principles For Validation Of Non-Formal And Informal Learning.

https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/etv/Information_resources/EuropeanInventory/publications/EC_common_principles_validation_20040303.pdf

Cedefop, European Commission, ICF (2019). European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update: Synthesis report. http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/european_inventory_validation_2018_synthesis.pdf

Cedefop. European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/search?keywords=guidelines+for+validation+of+nonformal+and+informal+learningth>

Centre of Youth Programmes of Estonian Agency for Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps. <https://euroopanood.ee/kvaliteet/noortepass/>

Continuing education standard RT I, 11.11.2016, 2. <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/111112016002>

Council of the European Union (2012). Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012/C 398/01). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32012H1222%2801%29>

E-school bag. Digital learning materials. <https://e-koolikott.ee/et/search?q=V%C3%95TA&lang=est&minAdded=2009&maxAdded=2023>

Estonian Education Information System. <https://www.ehis.ee/>

Estonian Europass Centre. <https://www.kutsekoda.ee/europassi-keskus-2/>

Estonian Quality Agency for Education. Kõrghariduse kvaliteedi hindamine. <https://haka.ee/korgkoolile/korghariduse-valishindamine-estis/>

Estonian Quality Agency for Education. Kutsehariduse kvaliteedi hindamine. <https://haka.ee/kutsekoolile/hindamine/>

Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund. Web portal Minu karjäär. <https://minukarjaar.ee/et>

European Commission (2004). Common European principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning. Brussels, Commission of the European Communities.

https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/etv/Information_resources/EuropeanInventory/publications/EC_common_principles_validation_20040303.pdf

European Commission (2023). Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2023 (Version 3, 04.04.23). <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/document/erasmus-programme-guide-2023-version-3-040423>

Haridusportaal. www.haridusportaal.edu.ee

Haridusportaal. VÕTA - väärtustame ja kasutame varem õpitut! <https://haridusportaal.edu.ee/artiklid/v%C3%B5ta#v%C3%B5ta-p%C3%B5him%C3%B5tted>

Higher Education Act RT I, 15.03.2022, 5. <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/115032022005>

Higher education standard RT I, 07.10.2022, 5. <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/107102022005>

Jällekooli.ee <https://jallekooli.ee/>

Johnson, M. (2016). VÕTA kutse andmisel. <https://vana.kutsekoda.ee/fwk/contenthelper/10618872/10633392>

Kasvulava OÜ (2023). VÕTA raport. Estonian Qualifications Authority

Ministry of Education and Research (2005). Lifelong Learning Strategy 2005–2008. <https://www.digar.ee/arhiiv/nlib-digar:12401>

Ministry of Education and Research (2018). VÕTA rakendamine täiskasvanute gümnaasiumides 2017/18.

Ministry of Education and Research (2020). Education Strategy 2021–2035. <https://www.hm.ee/ministeerium-uudised-ja-kontakt/ministeerium/strateegilised-alusdokumendid-ja-programmid#haridusvaldkonna-are>

Ministry of Education and Research, Estonian Cooperation Assembly, Eesti Haridusfoorum Foundation (2014). Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020. <http://www.digar.ee/id/nlib-digar:259547>

Ministry of Education and Research. 'Täiskasvanuhariduse edendamine ja õppimisvõimaluste avardamine 2015–2023' (Promoting adult education and expanding learning opportunities). <https://www.hm.ee/kutse-ja-taiskasvanuharidus/taiskasvanuharidus/tasuta-kursused>

Ministry of Education and Research. Noorte edu toetuseks – võimekuse arendamine mitteformaalõppe loimimiseks formaalõppega 2021–2023. <https://www.hm.ee/noorte-edu-toetuseks-voimekuse-arendamine-mitteformaaloppe-loimimiseks-formaaloppega-2021-2023>

Ministry of Education and Research. Principles of VNIL. https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2022-06/v6ta_p6himotted.pdf

Ministry of Education and Research. Varasemate õpingute ja töökogemuse arvestamine. <https://www.hm.ee/kutse-ja-taiskasvanuharidus/taiskasvanuharidus/vota>

Must, O., Must, A., Täht, K. (2015). Programmi TULE uuringu 'Haridustee valikud ning õpingute katkestamise asjaolud Eesti Kõrghariduses' aruanne. University of Tartu.

https://dspace.ut.ee/bitstream/handle/10062/49551/Haridustee_valikud_opingute_katkestamise_asj_aolud_korghariduses.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y

Pilli, E. (2008). Hindaja juhend: Varasemate Õpingute ja Töökogemuse Arvestamine. Tartu

Pilli, E., Vau, I. STARR tehnika kasutamine varasemate õpingute ja töökogemuse arvestamisel. https://hm.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2022-06/starr_juhend_loplik.pdf

Professions Act RT I, 13.03.2019, 10. <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/113032019010>

Regulation of the Government of the Republic. RT I, 09.07.2016, 9 Forms, statute and procedure for issuing graduation documents of a vocational school. <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/109072016009>

Regulation of the Minister of Education and Research. RT I, 22.09.2021, 5 The uniform grading system and the conditions of and procedure for issuing diplomas and diploma supplements. <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/122092021005>

Rutiku, S., Vau, I., Ranne, R. (2011). VÕTA Varasemate Õpingute ja Töökogemuse Arvestamine. Käsiraamat. Archimedes Foundation

Standard of Vocational Education RT I, 17.04.2019, 6. <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/117042019006>

Swallow (Peebo), A-L., Orouase, H., Pistle, E., Saluveer, A., Urbla, A. (2010). Varasemate õpingute ja töökogemuse arvestamine. Taotleja juhend. Archimedes Foundation

Vau, I., Rutiku, S., Voolaid, E. (2013). Varasemate õpingute ja töökogemuse arvestamise (VÕTA) hindaja käsiraamat. Archimedes Foundation https://vana.hm.ee/sites/default/files/vota_hindaja_kasiraamat.pdf

Vocational Educational Institutions Act RT I, 16.06.2020, 8. <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/116062020008>

VÕTA (varasemate õpingute ja töökogemuse arvestamise) süsteemi ja põhimõtete väljaarendamine ja juurutamine (2007). <https://web.archive.org/web/20100717013748/http://www.ut.ee/lykka/164880>

VÕTA Käsiraamat. https://hm.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2022-06/vota_kasiraamat.pdf