

TES - DEVELOPING TEACHERS' EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT SKILLS

WORK PACKAGE 1

GATHERING THE NEEDED EXISTING INFORMATION

**PRESENTATION OF THE MOST IMPORTANT POLICY PAPERS THAT
PROVIDE GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPING VOCATIONAL ADULT
EDUCATION IN FINLAND**

AND

**DESCRIPTION OF EXISTING FINNISH PRACTICES FOR ASSESSING
VOCATIONAL COMPETENCES OF ADULT LEARNERS AND THE
CHALLENGES AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES**

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1. The policy papers

In this chapter are presented the “policy papers” that will have significant impact on Finnish vocational adult education in the near future. The documents are:

- Education and Research 2003-2008. Development Plan. Publications of Ministry of Education 2004: 8.
- Action and Economic Plan of the Ministry of Education 2008-2011. Publications of Ministry of Education 2007: 3.
- A decree on personalisation 28.11.2006
- The guidelines and recommendations for the development of student counselling in adult education

1.1 Development plan 2003 -2008 and Action and Economic Plan 2008-2011

Adult learning covers vocational training and general education as well as formal, non-formal and informal learning. Recently the Government has emphasized learner's profile irrespective of what kind of an environment learning takes place. In practice an adult learner is one who is 25 or over. Adult learner can be a student at all levels from primary to tertiary education. Different institutions arrange a great variety of courses and programmes for adults at all levels of formal education, and the provision of liberal adult education is extensive.

The challenges facing adult education in the future will be to respond to the constant ageing of population and to growing multiculturalism, to motivate adults to study, to improve the learning-to-learn skills among the poorly educated and trained, and especially to ensure equity and equality.

The aim is

- to enhance the knowledge and skills of the adult population,
- to increase educational opportunities for groups that are under-represented in adult learning, and to promote equality and active citizenship.

According to the *Adult Education Committee* the strategy of adult education and training should be built on four principles in the future:

- Self-improvement will form part of the lives of a growing number of citizens, as work communities evolve towards learning organisations.
- Adult education and training will provide trained work force for all job categories and all vocations and professions.
- Adult education and training will develop teaching and learning methods and content, providing quality opportunities for people to develop themselves both in qualifying and liberal education.
- Adult education and training will maintain and strengthen participatory democracy, prevent exclusion and support active citizenship.

The point of departure in *the development plan* is to ensure that basic security in education is realised. The aim is to prevent exclusion and to intervene at the earliest possible stage in risk factors; thereby realising basic security in education for all at all levels of education.

Care will be taken to achieve a high quality in education. The curricula will be formed into a systematically proceeding entity which accommodates individual difference. Principles for recognising prior learning will be devised for all levels of education. Recognition of prior learning will also be a strong element in the training of teaching personnel and school leadership. The development of educational content will take account of the growing role of international cooperation and the growing multiculturalism in Finnish society. Better opportunities will be provided for a balanced alternation of work and education. Those active in working life will be offered more flexible options for maintaining and improving vocational/professional skills and upgrading their level of education.

One central goal in the development of the education system is to improve the educational opportunities open to the adult population. It is up to the education system to ensure that the whole working-age population is able to gain solid vocational/ professional skills and constantly enhance their competencies. In the planning period, the focus will be on increasing educational opportunities for the adult population as part of lifelong learning policy. Adult education and training will be used to produce competent work force rapidly and flexibly for all job levels and for all occupations and to support the development of work communities. Education provision targeted at adults will be developed both as education and training for qualifications and degrees and as continuing education in a manner most suited for each level of education.

The resources will be allocated to enhance adults' opportunities to proceed from initial vocational qualifications to further and specialist qualifications and from secondary and post-secondary qualifications to higher education. It is estimated that the need for foreign labour will grow during the planning period. In response to the growing immigration, the public education and research system will be developed to cater for immigrants' special needs. Measures will be taken to make better use of the education and training completed by immigrants abroad through more flexible recognition of prior learning and by means of necessary supplementary education.

A major challenge in the development of vocational education and training is to create learning environments for developing vocational skills needed in working life and to promote the learning of students with different aims, motivation, abilities and cultural backgrounds. The new technologies will be used to diversify teaching methods and learning environments, to support and guide learning processes and to simulate work environments.

Vocational skills and vocational training make an important contribution to regional development and competitiveness and working life development. On-the-job learning and innovation are emerging as ever more crucial forms of skills development, which can be supported by means of vocational training. In addition skills enhancement, vocational training has a role in developing working life. Periods of on-the-job learning will be made a permanent part of initial vocational training. The content and quality of work-based learning will be developed in cooperation with employers.

1.2 The Decree on personalisation

Since 1994 it has been possible in Finland for adults to get a formal certificate of their vocational competences by having their competences assessed by certain assessment procedures. One basic idea behind building the *system of competence based qualifications* has been to provide adults with an opportunity to demonstrate their vocational competences in qualifications that are independent of the manner which the competences are obtained.

From 2000 on, constant effort has been made to improve the quality of the competence based qualifications. Special effort has been made on the other hand to *guidance*, and on the other to sharpen up the idea that adults should have their competences assessed with *participation in formal training only when needed*, i.e. to attend preparatory courses only to the extent necessary to fill in the gaps in their competences.

The law concerning adult education (Law 1013/2005) provides the vet-institutions to take charge of personalisation arrangements during the studies. In more detail, personalisation is defined in the statute framed by National Board of Education in 2006 (*The Decree on personalisation 28.11.2006*). Personalisation covers the entire study process, starting from the first contact by the potential student to completing the competence based exam. Personalisation as a process is divided in three separate phases which, however, overlap to some extent: recruitment, assessment and making the learning agreements.

Recruitment, the first of the three phases in personalisation procedure, covers all the measures needed to define the prior competence as well as other starting points of the potential student. During this diagnostic period various methods should be used, bias being in interaction an orientation to guidance. The purpose of the recruitment phase is to recognise, acknowledge and chart the learner's competence both as a learner and as a student heading for the certificate in question.

Assessment process (when needed) is the second phase of the personalisation process. Accordance to the competences defined by tri-angular co-operation (employers, employees, vet-institutions) is vital when designing the assessment process. Personalisation here means essentially a holistic orientation, where the assessment tasks contain both planning the assessment settings and implementation of them. The duration of the test, e.g., is in principle always up to the adult him/herself. The role of the self-evaluation is essential.

Learning arrangements (when needed) form the third phase of personalisation. Conditions as an adult student, prior learning, special needs and possibilities to work-place learning activities are to be figured. Personalisation means also that meaningful learning and evaluation methods are agreed.

Documents gathered during the personalisation process are collected and are undersigned by the stakeholders. The success of personalisation measures at individual cases are to be assessed as agreed by the sides.

1.3 The guidelines and recommendations for the development of student counselling in adult education

In the beginning of 2000's National Board of Education conducted a survey of the quality of the student counselling activities in Finnish vocational adult education institutions. It was found out that less than 10 % of counselling personnel have appropriate training in adult education and there was not enough financial put in the counselling activities. Many institutions lacked the plan or wider strategy for student counselling and counselling activities were usually not included in institutional curricula. In many cases counselling activities solved individual problems of individual students. The activities were not seen and implemented as an on going process throughout the studies from the activities before the studies to the transition phase activities.

Also it was found out that the content and the methods of counselling should have more variety in adult education. More often the students should have a personal plan for counselling and systematic implementation of personal and group counselling should be available for all students. Also counselling in internet should be more often used and in the longer trainings having tutor teachers could make counselling activities more effective.

Although adult education institutions usually have large co-operational networks, counselling is not a significant part the activities in these networks. The transition phase there should have more competent personnel for counselling and the follow-up system of students' situation after the studies should be build.

According to the results of that survey National Board of Education formulated in 2004 the next guidelines and recommendations for the development of counselling activities in adult education:

- ensuring the competence on counsellors and financial resources of counselling activities,
- formulating the institutional counselling strategies,
- integrating counselling in a curriculum,
- understanding counselling as a process,
- developing the content and the methods of counselling,
- developing co-operational networks for counselling,
- developing the transition phase counselling activities.

2 The assessment of competencies: system of competence based qualifications

2.1 The system

Since 1994 a systematic procedure has been built for adults to show their competences whether the competences are obtained by participating in different kinds of courses or whether they are obtained through work experience has been built. As such it is seen to be a concrete way to implement the *principle of lifelong learning*.

In Finnish competence based qualifications system there are qualifications at three levels:

- vocational qualifications,
- further vocational qualifications and
- specialist vocational qualifications.

Vocational qualifications represent the same level of competence which that can be obtained by participating in vocational education and training. Vocational qualifications also give the same eligibility for further education as vocational education and training. In *further vocational qualifications* it is assumed that a person has at least three years of work experience in respective field. *Specialist vocational qualifications* are for persons who are very skilled in their field and who already have at least five years work experience in respective field. The number of participants in different qualifications has grown from 3000 in 1995 to 51 000 in 2004.

The next picture shows the place of the system of competence based qualifications as a part of Finnish educational system:

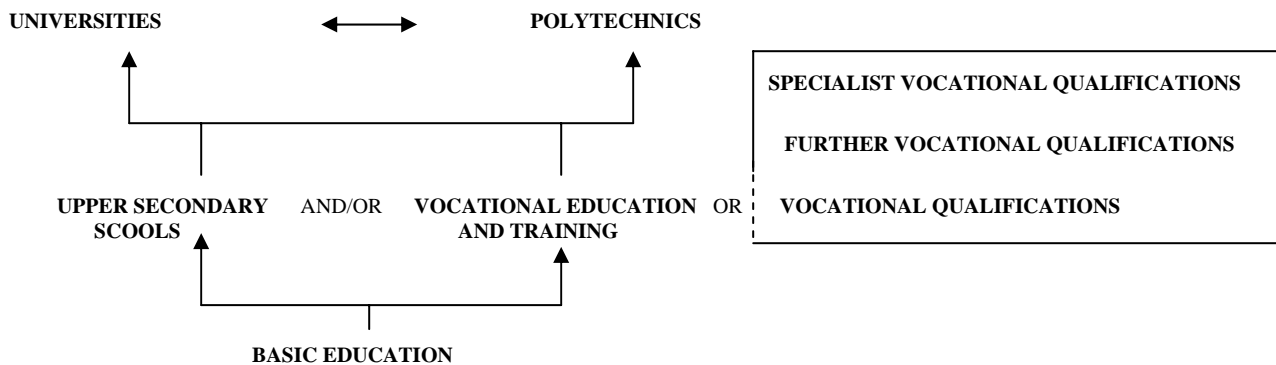


Figure: The system of competence based qualifications as a part of Finnish educational system

Ministry of Education is responsible for the qualification structure and the National Board of Education decides on the requirements for the qualifications. NBE also appoints the Qualification Committees, who are responsible for organising the qualifications. The examinations are conducted by the arrangers of qualifications, which usually are the VET-institutions.

Before 1994 there was a piloting period during which different stakeholders – working life, vocational institutions and national board of education - started work together in order to build the nationwide system for competence based assessment system. One of the basic principles concerning the assessment activities has been built on these early experiences: *the principle of triangular cooperation*. The competences are defined in committees where there are representatives from employers, employees and vet-institutions. The Qualification Committees also have these three interest groups as their members. On the implementation level same cooperation exists: assessor teams (the team that makes the assessment decisions) consists of representatives from these same stakeholders. Behind these activities there is a goal to increase the collaboration between working life and adult education.

In 2000 National Board of Education conducted an evaluation, which focused on the efficacy of the system of competence based qualifications, on how its core elements accomplish to their tasks and on the results yielded by the system. The evaluation showed that consideration of working life needs had increased as a starting point of vocational adult education. Also it was found out that the involvement of working life in the assessment of qualification performances and in particular the Qualification Committees had brought the various stakeholders closer to each other. However, the study indicated also, that there were some defects in the work of the Qualification Committees, which had to do with the confusion mainly regard to task and authority.

At first the idea was that adults could have their competences assessed without participation in formal training. However the evaluation confirmed the fact that virtually all graduates had undergone preparatory training, in order to fill the possible gaps in their competences and to cope with the examination.

The evaluation also pointed out, that both the students and representatives of working life regarded the skill assessed in the assessment to be appropriate. However in many cases, the arrangement of the

examination, the demonstration tasks and assessments of performances corresponded only in part to the requirements of the qualification in question.

2.2 Assessment in competence based qualifications

In the system of competence based qualifications National Board of Education has given the guidelines concerning the assessment procedures. However, the Qualification Committees of each qualification are able to define and decide quite independently, what kind of approach to assessment and what kinds of assessment tools are approved in their qualifications. This means that there are several kinds of assessment practices in different qualifications and the examinations are implemented in a variety of ways. So, there has been continuous discussion and debate concerning the assessment procedures from the very beginning of the system in 1994.

The main issues of this discussion have been (and still are) the core purpose of assessment (why?), the nature of competence (what?), the subjects of assessment (who?) and the assessment procedures and tools (how?).

The discussion on “why?”

From the very beginning of the system of competence based qualifications there has been discussion what is the main purpose of the assessment activities. There has been wide consensus that the main purposes of developing this system are the improvement of Finnish working life and raising and ensuring the quality of competences. However, there have been different views whether - and to what extent - the assessment should benefit the professional growth of a person whose competences are assessed. Some assessors emphasize the control nature of the assessment. Their only interest is to find out if some one has - or hasn't - the competences demanded. On the other hand, some understand the assessment tasks and examinations as a significant phase of one's professional growth. Thus in this discussion the issue has been the main function of assessment: whether the emphasis should be on ascertaining the competence or on the development of the competence.

The assessment in competence based qualifications is officially clearly criterion referenced. Thus, the purpose of assessment activities is to find out, what is the quality of one's competences, compared with the assessment criteria. However, the idea of normative assessment can be still be found in some descriptions of the assessment procedures. In some cases much effort has been put i.e. that all the candidates should have exactly same kind of assessment environments and that the assessment tasks are the same for everyone. The question of objectivity is important especially in normative assessment. That's why the demand of strict objectivity is important for many assessors, even though the demand of objectivity is not in the same importance in the criterion referenced assessment as it is normative assessment. In some cases the idea of normative assessment is also found in the demand that only certain percentage (i.e. 80 %) of candidates can be approved in certain year.

The discussion on “what?”

At first there was a wide debate about the definition of competences. There were many proponents for the idea that the examinations should only cover the vocation specific skills and knowledge. On the other hand there were strong opinions that generic competences - such as cooperation and interaction skills, motivational skills, adjustment skills, learning and development skills, and socio-cultural skills -

should be included in competences in every qualification and thus also be assessed. Nowadays the idea of wider interpretation of competences is predominant in most of the bases for qualifications. However in some cases generic competences are only in very limited role in the descriptions of the qualifications they are not properly examined.

As well as the “area” of competence has different interpretations, there are also different points of view to the “nature” of competence. Some tend to have an atomistic approach to competence. Thus, in some cases competences are described as long lists of operational skills and knowledge. Accordingly the assessment procedures tend to be focused on single skills and many times the practise and the theory behind the practise are separated from each other and also assessed separately (if assessed at all). On the other hand there exists a holistic approach to competence. In this case the competences are described as wide functional entities. Also the assessment practises are more holistic i.e. information for many different competences can be gathered during one work shift. Usually in this kind of situations also the question of theory and practise is solved so, that the assessment tasks contain the planning of certain activities and carrying out these activities. In the planning task the candidate has to produce the theoretical framework which the activities are based on.

The discussion on “who?”

Who has the right to participate in the assessment process has been much discussed issue from the very beginning of the existence of competence based qualification system. At first no distinction was made between collecting the assessment information and making decisions according to that information. So there was quite wide common understanding that only very few people could participate in the assessment process. In most of the cases the same people who had the right to make the assessment decisions (the assessor teams) also collected all the information themselves.

There were also attempts to limit the number of participants in the name of objectivity. For example the teachers who participated in the preparatory training were not allowed to take part in the assessment process. In the name of objectivity also the candidate’s own work place was not considered to be suitable place for implementing one’s competence and one’s colleagues and employers were considered to be too “subjective” sources of assessment information.

However, quite soon it was found out that this kind of approach lead to very costly and limited as well as artificial situations from which the information could be collected. Thus in many cases - as the evaluation report pointed out - the arrangement of the examination could correspond only in part to the requirements of the qualification in question.

Nowadays the practices vary from rigid, “objectivistic” approach to more flexible and pragmatic approaches. For example the role of the teachers of preparatory training as information source is in most cases approved, the tendency towards authenticity in assessment recognises also the work places as possible examination environments and the use of portfolio as an assessment tool also makes it possible to have different kinds of informants as sources of assessment data.

As significant part of who? –question also the role of self-assessment has been discussed during the past twelve years. Nowadays self-assessment has clearly two functions which are apparent in different qualifications: 1) in most bases of qualifications the ability of self-assessment is recognised to be significant part of competence, 2) in many cases the assessors see self-assessments to be a vital source

of assessment information in order to make “good” assessment decisions. However, at first self-assessment wasn’t recognised widely as significant and as natural part of assessment process as it is today. In many cases only feature of “self-assessment” was, when the student was asked to evaluate the arrangements of examination procedures. In late 1990’s National Board of Education reminded the Qualification Committees and the assessors of the importance of self-assessment and demanded stronger position to self-assessment in assessment procedures.

The discussion on “how?”

At first the assessment procedures were mostly quite traditional examinations and tests. Objectivity, measurement and standardisation of methods were the keywords. The methods that were planned for assessing how successful certain transfer process of skills and knowledge had been were also applied in competence based environment. However, many assessors realised quite soon that competence based approach needed also the approach to assessment that was different from those that were familiar in formal training. Gradually the variety of methods expanded. Portfolios, observations, discussions, self-assessments are nowadays quite widely used, although there still are some Qualification Committees who deny i.e. the use of portfolio in their qualifications’ assessment procedures.

At the same time as the variety of assessment methods have increased also the structure of examinations has developed from simple “theory exam / practical test” –structure to more versatile assessment procedures. In many cases the examinations are integrated in normal work day by giving the students the assessment tasks which consists of planning certain work process, and implementing as well as assessing it.

The development trends in assessment

In short it can be said, that at the beginning of competence based qualification system the assessment practices relied in most of the cases on the behaviouristic paradigm of learning. The bases of the critique towards these practices have been based mainly on the constructivist paradigm. So the main trends in development of assessment procedures during the past twelve years in the system of competence based qualifications have been:

- from ascertainment of competence also towards development of competence,
- from narrow and atomistic understanding of competence towards more wide and holistic view,
- from measurement towards qualitative assessment methods,
- from external assessment also towards self-assessment.