

Finland: Validation of Immigrants' Prior Learning (DigiOstu)

Type of provider

Salpaus Further Education (Koulutuskeskus Salpaus) is a college providing vocational upper secondary education and adult education and training in the Lahti region. Salpaus cooperates with the Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, the coordinator for the DigiOstu project.

Objectives

DigiOstu is a teacher training program, which helps vocational teachers and staff in the recognition and validation of immigrants' prior learning by increasing their understanding of the ways to do so and introducing the necessary tools. It is the digital successor of the Ostu project, which was financed by the Finnish National Agency for Education.

Assessment approaches

Teachers are encouraged to use clear, language-conscious language and examples with the students. Immigrant students demonstrate and become aware of their own competences by telling stories, demonstrating their skills in practical situations, through pictures and videos, by creating portfolios...

Target Group

1. teachers
2. immigrants, refugees

Potential transferability/ scalability

Practical tools of assessment are easily transferred. Educating teachers in the validation of immigrants' prior learning has many advantages, but training teachers is only the beginning; the methods must then be implemented in practice. Needs resources: time, skill and money. Benefits from managerial involvement.

Summaries or Basic elements of analysis

Teachers and students use a variety of tools together: narrative tools, portfolios, pictures, videos... Educated immigrants benefit particularly from portfolios. Students not used to abstract thinking need concrete situations in which they can demonstrate their skills. Tools also useful for employers.

Introduction in keywords

- Validation of Immigrants' Prior Learning (DigiOstu)
- Finland
- teacher training project
- how to validate immigrants' prior learning, non-formal and informal competences
- a variety of tools: narrative tools, portfolios, pictures, videos, practical demonstrations...
- professional skills and general competences

5 areas descriptive text

Organisation and Description of the tool(s) (which skills are assessed)

Salpaus Further Education (Koulutuskeskus Salpaus) is a college providing vocational upper-secondary education and adult education and training in the Lahti region. It cooperates with the Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, which coordinates the DigiOstu project. DigiOstu is a teacher training project that helps vocational teachers and staff in the recognition and validation of immigrants' prior learning, introducing the necessary tools and increasing their understanding of the ways to do so. It is the digital successor of the Ostu project, which was financed by the Finnish National Agency for Education, and ended in 2016.

Maija-Leena Pusa, a counselling teacher and project coordinator at Salpaus, and a key figure in the DigiOstu project, sees a clear need for the validation of non-formal and informal competencies of immigrants. Even when immigrants have certificates, they are not necessary valid proof of skill. In many countries, the language of teaching is English or French, not the native tongue of the locals, meaning that in some cases students have been taught in a language they hardly know.

It is relatively easy to assess concrete skills: can someone cook or weld. Figuring out what capacity someone has to study abstract things, work independently and how they cooperate, manage and organise things is more difficult. Sometimes people show their skills in unexpected ways; even though a refugee did not know how to count the ingredients, they were intuitively able to prepare the right amount of food for a group of people.

Implementation (how the tool is used, how the assessors are trained, how often it is used)

Teachers learn what to pay attention to when assessing the prior learning of immigrants, but also how to guide and counsel their students. As assessors, they must use clear, language-conscious language and be prepared to explain phrases with examples. It can be difficult for almost anyone to describe their competences, let alone for immigrants and refugees. Some are not accustomed to abstract thinking; concepts like competence or validation may be completely unfamiliar to them.

The key is a wide variety of tools and skills. The teacher may for example have to use any language they or the students know. Students demonstrate their competence using narrative tools, in interviews or by telling stories of what they have done previously, or in practical situations, participating in simulations or workshops. During the on-the-job training, they can take pictures of themselves or use videos.

Description of the target groups

The DigiOstu project educates vocational teachers in the validation of the prior learning of immigrants and refugees. They work with varied groups, from refugees who arrive as a “tabula rasa”, no matter what their status used to be in their home country, to those who do not know how to read, write or count.

The easiest target groups to work with are those with very practical vocations, such as construction workers or cooks, who can easily demonstrate what they are able to do. The expectations in such fields also tend to be similar in different countries. Very well educated immigrants, whose knowledge is more culture specific, face more challenges because their skills do not transfer as easily. A lawyer must know the legal system of the country in which they practice their profession in great detail, and a journalist must have strong language skills in the local tongue. Immigrant doctors have perhaps not learnt the medical terms in Latin.

Refugees come with their own challenges. They may have tacit knowledge, but have not necessarily received any education and may be at a loss how to proceed – what they want to study or work with in Finland. Pusa compares figuring out their competences to detective work.

Portfolios have proven successful for educated immigrants. Other groups need concrete situations where they show their skills, pictures, or someone to help them “pay attention to what is going on when [somebody is] talking about competencies”.

Policy context

There is an on-going reform in the Finnish vocational education sector, with new legislation coming into effect in 2018. As the reform emphasises practical skills and flexible study routes, validation of prior learning is a “must” in the new system. After their prior competences have been assessed, the students continue their study path or transition directly into working life. In adult education and training, competence-based qualification has already been a practice for years.

The reform places more of the responsibility of developing and improving students’ vocational skills onto the workplaces. Thus, employers also need concrete assessment tools.

Teachers becoming aware of the ways and importance of validating immigrants’ prior learning is only the beginning. They need resources, trials, different processes and tools to discover what works. This requires interest and involvement at the managerial level. Sometimes project funding is the only way forward.

Impact for assesseses

Teachers need cultural sensitivity, but also the courage to do things differently. Sometimes you have to gently introduce the new methods. Pusa mentions the strongly negative reactions some students had to the idea of self-assessment. She countered their anger, saying that their (in)ability to assess their own skills might affect how others assess them. Self-assessment is, of course, a core professional skill.

“There are thousands of cases, and I think we are just starting to know how to do this,” Pusa says, but there are success stories already. After having studied marketing, a former journalist from Russia found that her language skills and established network were of use in business. In the end, it is an economic question; companies gain from people who are qualified, new ways of thinking and knowledge of new markets. The Finnish society benefits economically.

Yet for individual immigrants, the most important aspect of validating their prior competence is perhaps not how it directly affects their studies and work, but that they get “this feeling of empowerment”. Someone acknowledges their abilities.

<https://en.salpaus.fi/>

