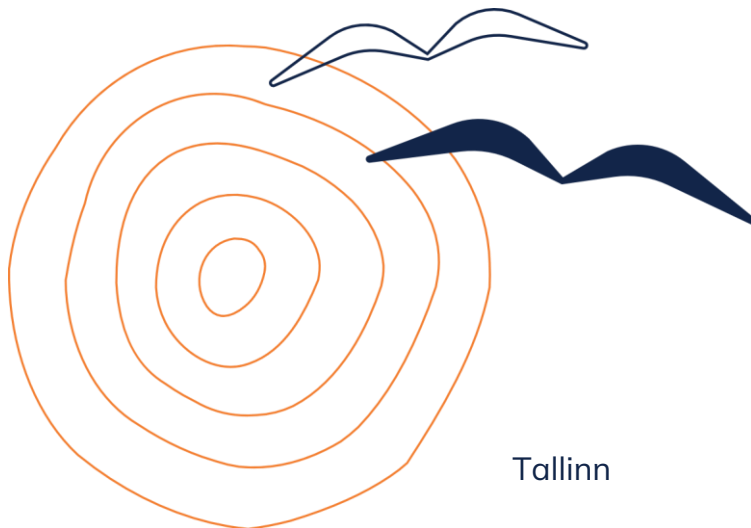HAKA Estonian Quality
Agency for Education

Quality assessment of curriculum groups of continuing education providers

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS 2022-2023

Tallinn

2023

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Introduction

Since 2022, Haka (Estonian Quality Agency for Education) has carried out a curriculum group based quality assessment of continuing training providers. Quality assessment of curriculum groups is an assessment of the curricula of continuing training providers and the learning and teaching as well as learning development conducted thereof, with the aim of providing recommendations for improving the quality of learning and teaching and recognizing best quality. This shall include an assessment of whether and how the curricula, learning and teaching and learning development of the selected curriculum group meet the following conditions:

- the principles of quality of continuing training as defined in the Adult Education Act and the Standard of Continuing Training;
- national and international standards and developments;
- the quality criteria set for the assessment.

As a result of the assessment, the training providers will be able to obtain a quality label. In 2022-2023, the quality of the curriculum groups was assessed among the partners of the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund's training voucher.

This analysis provides an overview of the results of the quality assessments of curriculum groups in continuing training carried out in 2022-23 and will further open up the strengths and areas of improvement outlined in the assessment decisions adopted by the Continuing Education Assessment Council in 2023.

1. Quality assessments of curriculum groups in numbers

During the period 2022-23, a quality assessment of curriculum group(s) was carried out in 117 continuing training providers. The invitation to participate was open to 126 providers, but 9 of them withdrew. 15 providers were assessed in 2022 and 102 in 2023.

Assessments were carried out in 16 curriculum groups. In most cases one, in some two curriculum groups were assessed per provider. The greatest number of providers were assessed in the curriculum group Management and Administration, 31 providers, 15 in the language learning curriculum group, 11 in social work and counselling curriculum group, and the number of providers assessed in other curriculum groups was less than 8 providers.

The providers were assessed by assessment panels consisting of at least two members, of which at least one was an expert in the field taught and at least one expert in curriculum design and adult education.

1.1. Assessment results

Below, we will provide an overview of the results of the assessments. The results of the assessment decisions were grouped in Excel, where a general analysis of descriptive statistics was then carried out. 117 providers participated in the assessments, most of which received a positive assessment decision (Graph 1). 89 providers or 76% passed the assessment successfully, including more than a quarter (35 or 30 %) of providers, which were awarded the

quality label. However, 24 % that is 28 providers, did not pass the assessment and received a negative assessment decision.

Assessment results
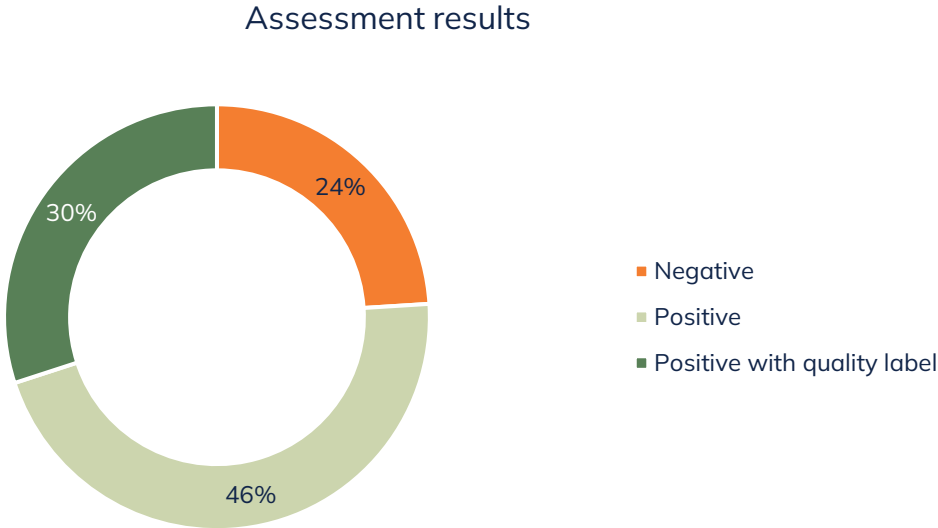
Figure 1 Results of the curriculum group quality assessments 2022-23. The results of the assessments are presented as of 21 December 2023.

The assessment of curriculum groups was divided into four assessment areas, focusing on core processes of continuing training: curriculum and curriculum development, learning and teaching, trainers and resources. Figure 2 outlines the results of assessments by assessment areas.

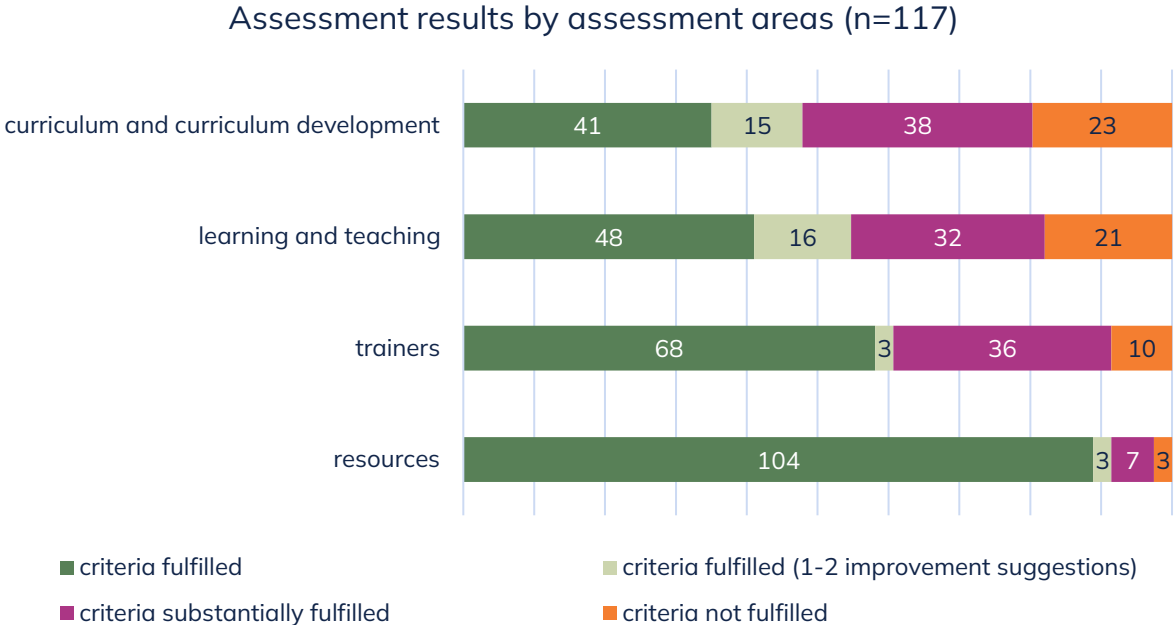## Assessment results by assessment areas (n=117)

Figure 2 The results of the curriculum group quality assessment by assessment areas. The results of the assessment are presented as of 21.12.23.

In the area of curriculum and curriculum development, the requirements were met (up to 2 areas of improvement) in almost half of the assessed continuing training providers (56). In 38 providers, the area was assessed as substantially fulfilled, while 23 providers did not meet the requirements.

64 providers met the requirements in the field of learning and teaching. In 32 providers, the requirements were assessed as substantially fulfilled and in 21 providers, the requires of the assessment area were not met.

There were fewer problems of non-compliance in the area of trainers, i.e. almost three quarters (71) of the providers were assessed to meet the criteria. In 36 providers, the requirements were assessed as substantially fulfilled and in 10 were not met.

In the area of resources, there were generally no problems encountered in the providers – as many as 107 providers were assessed as meeting the requirements. In 7 providers, the requirements were assessed as substantially fulfilled and in only three not fulfilled.

1.2.   Summary

Analysis of descriptive statistics provides a good overview of the results of the curriculum group quality assessments. Out of 117 assessed providers, 89 providers passed (either with a positive result, positive result with a secondary condition or received the quality label), while 28 failed. This result shows that **in 76 % of the assessed providers, the curriculum, teaching and learning as well as development thereof meet the quality principles for continuing education as defined in the Adult Education Act and the Continuing Education Standard, national and international standards and developments, as well as the quality criteria defined for assessment.**

The descriptive analysis of assessment areas **shows that the most challenging areas were curricula and curriculum development, learning and teaching** – just under a quarter of the assessed providers assessed failed to meet the requirements. At the same time, 71 providers were assessed as "substantially fulfilling the requirements" under these two areas, which also points to problems with the curricula and provision of education and training in many providers.

In the 'trainers' assessment area, the requirements were mostly met or substantially met. This shows that majority of the providers assessed (107) have qualified and experienced trainers. The smallest number of problems were encountered in the 'resources' assessment area, where only three providers were assessed not to meet the requirements.

The following chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the strengths and areas of improvement identified in the 2023 assessments across assessment areas.

2.   Strengths and areas of improvement in the 2023 assessment decisions

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the strengths and areas of improvement presented in the assessment decisions. The data were analysed as a whole and in relation to the assessment areas but not to the individual assessment decisions of each training provider. A responsible analyst was assigned to each assessment area, who validated the principles of analysis in this field with another analyst. The principles of coding were commonly agreed, a common code was agreed upon in the event of inconsistency between codes, the approach

was agreed in a joint discussion. Subsequently, code trees were created for most assessment areas, which served as a basis for analysing the results. Consensual solutions were found in the event of disagreement.

In 2023, 102 assessment decisions were adopted, on the basis of which the following analysis has been carried out. The assessment decisions identified 320 strengths and 662 areas for improvement. There were also training providers for which no strengths and/or areas of improvement were identified. The strengths and areas for improvement in each assessment area are presented below.

2.1. Curriculum and curriculum development

Strengths of the curriculum and curriculum development in the 2023 assessment decisions

The assessment panels mentioned 76 strengths under curricula and curriculum development. Curriculum strengths highlighted personalised approaches to learners, curriculum descriptions, and curriculum implementation. Quality, curriculum development and curriculum designers were mentioned as curriculum development strengths.

According to the assessment panels, **curriculum development** (41 strengths were identified) is the greatest strength of curricula. Curricula will be developed on the basis of existing legislation (e.g. Adult Education Act), guidance material, programmes, etc. (e.g. Edu and Tegu Entrepreneurship Programme). Many curricula are developed in cooperation with entrepreneurs, practitioners, employers or professional associations. There are also providers that involve alumni of trainings in the development of curricula. The providers that developed the curricula according to the needs of the target group, be it employers or learners, were highlighted. Well-designed and agreed curriculum development process and its implementation, as well as the pursuit of continuous quality were also mentioned. For example, one provider used the Deming circle to analyse and develop the curriculum. Regular and team (trainers, Director of the provider and head of training) development of curricula was also considered to be a strength. In order for trainers to have the competence to develop curricula systematically, the training of trainers on curriculum development was highlighted. Flexibly structured curricula, where a trainer can choose learning methods tailored to learners' needs when implementing the curriculum, were also recognized.

The assessment panels also recognized the training providers when the curricula were clear, **and comprehensively written.** In the curriculum description, the highest degree of detail was assessed, e.g. if the curriculum included the time projected for acquiring skills, so that the learner knows how long it takes to complete the topics. The scope, content, learning outcomes, target audience relevance, coherence and clear presentation were also assessed. If the information is presented in a user-friendly manner and easily accessible, it creates the prerequisites for more learners to enter training.

In addition to the systematic curriculum development process and clear spelling out, the assessment panels also highlighted the well-designed implementation of the curricula. First and foremost, the needs and specificities of the learner in the implementation of the curricula were recognised, requiring a mapping of learners' wishes by a lecturer or training provider.

The learning process is structured in a way that allows learners to be involved in the discussion on training objectives and topics and to identify topics that are relevant to the audience. /Extract from an assessment decision/

Curricula are flexible as regards the assignment of specific tasks and are based on the input provided by the group, e.g. the selection of the dishes to be prepared is decided together taking into account the level and needs of learners. /Extract from an assessment decision/

A curriculum was recognized in which a practical assessment of learning outcomes was carried out, based on real management situations and tasks and the format of conversation clubs, which helped to consolidate what has been learned. Reflections carried out at the end of each module were also used to evaluate the learning and internalization, so that the trainer and learners can assess how well they have understood, whether there is a need for further clarification or further practicing.

One training provider involved learners in the development of training materials, where, based on training feedback, a textbook was prepared for the training in cooperation with the learners. Training providers that provided training in several languages also took into account learner centeredness so that language skills or lack thereof would not become an obstacle to learning.

A number of training providers have taken the learning-centred approach beyond the delivery of the curriculum and personally approach the learners after training. For example, they keep in touch with alumni to know how they are doing. After completing the training, some providers offer a free of charge hour-long consultation to support those who have completed the training for becoming an entrepreneur. There are providers that, after training, help the learners to find a job.

In addition, the assessment panels noticed and recognized the curriculum designers and their professionalism. Several curricular designers were industry promoters who, for example, participated in a working group on the development of professional standards or internationally trained practitioners who demonstrate their competence in international accreditation every year. The in-depth commitment of curriculum designers was acknowledged. One provider has a system in which the new curriculum designer (training manager) is assigned a mentor to ensure a consistent high level of curricula.

Curriculum and curriculum development improvement areas in the 2023 assessment decisions

The largest number of improvement areas identified by assessment panels were under the assessment area of curriculum and curriculum development, in total 371. Looking at the keywords of this field of assessment separately, there were considerably more improvement suggestions for curricula than for curriculum development. As regards the curriculum, the assessment panels brought 171 areas of improvement to curriculum descriptions, 57 to curriculum content, 70 to the coherence of curricula and 25 curricula implementation. For curriculum development, the assessment panels made 48 suggestions for improvement.

For curricula as descriptive documents, almost all aspects of a curriculum and their combinations were identified that could either be missing from the curriculum or are vaguely written or do not correspond to the Adult Education Act. **The curriculum description** did not

include, for example, the title of the training, the curriculum group, the purpose, the learning outcomes, the target group, themes, the contact learning and its description, the description of independent work, the description of the content of the traineeship, the list of learning materials, the volume of the different parts of the curriculum, the proportion of practical learning in relation to the total volume of learning, the proportion of total work to contact learning, the volume of independent work and practical tasks, how the training is delivered (methods), assessment methods and assessment criteria, the conditions for completion, the mandatory components of the curriculum according to the Adult Education Act, minimum qualification requirements for trainers, description of the learning environment.

For the same aspects, the information was also vaguely written. For example, the description of the target group is inaccurate, misleading and it is not clear who is expected to attend the training, the description of the training contains references to outdated professional standards, legislation or licence, incorrect reference to professional standard, p the volume of learning is not indicated in academic hours, part of the learning volume is not included in the training (independent work, traineeship), the list of learning materials is not up to date and relevant, does not correspond to the content of the training, the assessment criteria are not clearly spelled out, the assessment criteria are general and confusing, the assessment methods are not correctly stated, it is not clear whether it is a basic or induction course, information in the curriculum is provided under the wrong heading, imprecise and non-harmonized terms (certificate of participation vs certificate of attainment, traineeship vs. practical training), ambiguous title of the training, objective of the training unclear, inconsistency between the advertising text and the text of the curriculum (differences in volume, title, etc.), conditions for entering studies too general and confusing, wrong curriculum group, incomplete information about the learning environment, etc.

As regards **the content of the curriculum**, the assessment panels saw learning outcomes as a key area of improvement. More than half of the recommendations were written on learning outcomes, either in too general terms or in such a way that they could not be assessed. There were also curricula where the learning outcomes of some topics were lacking, e.g. those in the sub-skills of the professional standard; or were not relevant to the topic of training. In a number of cases, the assessment method did not allow some of the learning outcomes of training to be assessed. In all of these cases, the problem was the use of a test as an assessment method that does not allow the learning outcomes of practical skills to be assessed.

Programmes that were underpinned by outdated requirements or themes and trainings whose titles gave false promises were also mentioned.

> *The title of the curriculum is imprecise, including the term 'work practice', the nature and content of which are not described in the curriculum. /Extract from the assessment decision/*

Professional standard based curricula were a challenge for a number of training providers. According to the assessment panels, one training cannot prepare a learner for several professional examinations.

> *The curriculum is based on a youth worker, level 6 sub-profession of professional standards, but according to the objective, students are prepared for both camp teacher level 4, camp teacher, level 6 and camp manager level 6 professional examination. A*

single training course can only prepare the learners for one professional qualification /extract from the assessment decision/

The assessment panels noted that, in certain situations, it was not appropriate to provide training based solely on independent learning, such as basic trainings.

Both curricula are based on the learner's independent work, where responsibility for the outcome of the learning lies with the learner. Basic knowledge acquisition is not assessed. The Panel recommends the inclusion of a contact learning part to the curriculum where the learner is provided with basic knowledge covered by the learning outcome(s), the attainment of which is assessed. /Extract from the assessment decision/

In the areas of improvement of **curriculum coherence**, a number of topics can be highlighted. The biggest number of mismatches were noted by assessment panels in terms of the volume of learning, where the volume of learning was not sufficient to achieve the learning outcomes within the planned time. The main problem was that learning outcomes cannot be achieved with the content of the curriculum, the planned time and the mode in which it is carried out. In some cases, the bottleneck was the too low proportion of practical or independent work.

The next cluster of mismatches was the mismatch between learning outcomes and training topics where learning outcomes were not sufficient to cover the training themes, or the training themes did not cover the learning outcomes.

Another key incoherence was not taking into account the target group, with the result that the different sections of the curriculum were not relatable to whom the training was intended and what their prior knowledge was.

When looking at the target group, the conditions for entering the studies and the content of the study, the question arises as to whether the level is appropriate to the target group, since most of the learning outcomes are those people who start the course already need to know and know beforehand because of their work. /Extract from the assessment decision/

The learning outcomes of the curriculum contain significantly more competences (e.g. 'is able to evaluate', 'implements measures') than necessary for basic knowledge. In this way, the achievement of all learning outcomes may not be feasible for the target audience of beginners with the learning methods and time foreseen and may lead to superficial knowledge. We recommend adapting the curriculum to the needs and abilities of the target group (e.g. focusing on basic knowledge and skills). /Extract from the assessment decision/

In addition, the assessment panels pointed out inconsistencies in terms of the coherence between the different parts of the curricula. Such as methodology and target audience or title; the objective, learning outcomes and assessment methods; or title, learning outcomes and content; or learning outcomes, content and professional standard. There were a number of combinations in terms of lack of consistency.

The title of English A2.1 refers to language proficiency level A2.1, but the learning outcomes are formulated at language level A2. As a result, there is an inconsistency between the title and the other components of the curriculum in the curriculum under

assessment and the curriculum should be named English A2. /Extract from the assessment decision/

As regards the **implementation of the curriculum**, the assessment decisions contained a number of areas of improvement, mainly characterised by an inconsistency between the curriculum document and its implementation. For example, updates are introduced into traineeships, but they are not reflected in the curriculum or reverse cases where the curriculum has been updated, but the learning does not correspond to what has been promised in the curriculum.

Some assessment decisions showed that the teaching and learning methods used were much more diverse and exciting than those described in the curriculum, but which would help the learner to choose the appropriate training.

The interview revealed that curricula are being innovated both in terms of teaching methods and materials, but they do not appear in the curricula. /Extract from the assessment decision/

The assessment interview revealed that only changes to the professional standard(s) were made to the curriculum. Suggestions received from learners and employers will not be taken into account, and the proposals received from the professional qualification awarding body will only be integrated into the content of the training, i.e. the themes covered during the training. /Extract from the assessment decision/

In the case of a number of providers, it became clear that the volume of learning included in the curriculum differs from the actual training. For example, there were cases where training was provided on a smaller scale than foreseen in the curriculum.

According to the table at the end of the curriculum, the same training is provided with different volumes of learning, as well as time devoted to themes, and consequently different teaching methods. Since the curriculum on the website indicates a total course volume of 160 academic hours., it is not appropriate to provide training on the basis of the same curriculum in other volumes. /Extract from the assessment decision/

Further Inconsistencies with regard to the different parts of the curriculum and the learning to be carried out were highlighted. For example, the physical learning environment and face-to-face learning set out in the curriculum were not implemented in practice; the curriculum contained content that was not actually taught; or the assessment method differed from what was used in teaching and learning.

It is stated in the curriculum that the training ends with an examination; however, it emerged from the interview and self-analysis report that there is no examination as such and that the responsibility for the assessment lies with the trainer, who decides on the method of assessment (interview, discussion, test, etc.) according to the number of participants and the way they participate in the training. /Extract from the assessment decision/

A couple of curricula also promised supervised traineeships and supported learning, which were not actually offered to learners. There was also a difference between the same content of training in Estonian and Russian, where there was no cooperation between trainers and

there was no guarantee of uniform application of curricula to enable learners to receive the same level of learning. At the same time, it was noted that it is difficult to ensure learning that meets the needs of a broad target group of learners, as learners have different prior knowledge, and as a result, the knowledge and skills acquired can remain superficial and the desired outcome of the curriculum is not achieved.

One of the topics that emerged from assessment decisions relates to learning outcomes. In quite many cases, it became clear that some or all learning outcomes are not assessed. In most cases, these were the learning outcomes of practical skills.

> *The assessment method presented in the curriculum is not appropriate to assess all learning outcomes leading to a selective assessment of learning outcomes. /Extract from the assessment decision/*

Adherence to the curriculum in the course of training proved to be a challenge for many. In one case, it was noted that there was a lack of a responsible trainer for the curriculum, who would help to design and deliver the curriculum holistically by ensuring a coherent approach to delivery and implementation of the programme. The assessment panels pointed out that it was sometimes difficult to understand which curriculum was taught, how are the topics to be taught selected and taught, as there were inconsistencies in the information presented.

In the case of **curriculum development**, the assessment panels identified different areas of improvement. The assessment panels noticed that quite many providers do not have a system for curriculum development. Curricular development principles and review processes are missing. There is no agreement on who will develop the curricula and with what regularity. Some providers' websites do not provide information on the principles for quality assurance and organization of studies, which define the quality of curricula and how and when curricula are developed.

> *The assessment panel considers that the training provider does not have a system for the regular development and updating of curricula. Curricula have been developed many years ago and there have been no updates in the intervening period. Modification of the teaching material is the sole responsibility of the lecturer. /.../We recommend that the training provider develops and formulates principles for curriculum development. We suggest that the training provider appoints a person responsible for the curriculum development process. Regular review of curricula and needs based changes ensure that the curriculum is in line with legislative changes, potential learners' expectations and labour market needs. /Extract from the assessment decision/*

The need to develop curricula should arise from feedback, studies, etc. from different actors so that curricula meet the expectations of employers and society. According to assessment panels, a large number of providers do not rely on employers' needs, research results or learners' feedback when developing their curricula. They have either not explored the needs of the target group (employers, learners) nor collected feedback or do not take into account, for example, learners' feedback and needs in curriculum development.

> *Suggestions to improve the curriculum and the organization of studies on the basis of feedback from learners should also feature prominently in curriculum development. In this case, it is clear that there is no systematic feedback from learners and that the*

trainer has no information on what learners think could be changed in the curriculum and learning organisation. /Extract from the assessment decision/

There should also be a need for the development of curricula based on regulations, updates or agreed other requirements for certain areas. The assessment decisions revealed that some training providers did not rely on the competences required by legislation or professional standards when developing their curricula. In some cases, there were problems with the use of an outdated professional standard or regulation, or that materials underpinning the curriculum were outdated.

There are important shortcomings in the curriculum development process, as the curriculum review is undertaken, but the need to update the curriculum was overlooked. We recommend that more recent recommendations be taken into account when developing the curriculum, e.g. the International Codex Alimentarius Food Standard, guidance on the implementation of PRPs and HACCP systems, and to address among the topics the importance of food safety culture and the need for allergen control, as these topics are relevant to all staff. /Extract from the assessment decision/

While many providers had a curriculum development policy, they included providers for which the implementation of these principles was not confirmed in practice. As an area of improvement, the lack of a monitoring system when it comes to teaching and learning development practices was noted. For example, if the trainer is responsible for the development of training materials and assessment, how does the training provider know whether any necessary changes from feedback have been incorporated into the teaching and learning as well as the curriculum.

2.2.   Learning and teaching

Learning and teaching strengths in the 2023 assessment decisions

The strengths of learning and teaching have been highlighted 141 times in assessment decisions. Many assessment decisions mention an **individual approach to learners and their support**, which often starts even before the start of the training as a strength. Training providers **contact each registrant before the start of the training** to provide an overview of the content of the training, the organisation of the training, the amount of independent work, etc. The consultation will also identify the learner's expectations, needs and suitability of the training, as well as the motivation of the learner. A number of providers that passed the assessment with a positive outcome **offer free of charge trial classes or** days, seminars, counselling, *coaching*; some training providers ask learners to submit a CV, essay or a questionnaire. The information collected is a good input for trainers who will familiarise themselves with and take into account learners' background before the start of the training.

The trainer has developed a very comprehensive questionnaire on past experience in computer use that learners have to fill in before the training starts. Thus, the trainer has clear knowledge at an early stage of the level of proficiency of learners enrolling in their group and, accordingly, to adapt their teaching and learning and methodology,

including additional time for people who have little or no prior contact with a computer. /Extract from the assessment decision/

Flexible teaching based on learners' expectations and needs and building on learners' previous educational and work backgrounds in the learning process (e.g. selection of appropriate learning methods, differentiation of tasks, suggesting additional materials, targeted development of learning skills, etc.) have been highlighted as strengths in many providers that have received a positive assessment decision. In many providers that have received a positive assessment, the **content of learning is varied by the trainer according to the level of knowledge and experience of the learner**. This differentiation requires flexible formulation of **learning outcomes**:

The wording of learning outcomes is flexible enough to allow for a change in the scope of the different themes in training, in line with learners' needs, which supports the learning pathway and the achievement of the desired outcomes. /Extract from the assessment decision/

Among the **learning methods**, the assessment decisions highlighted active learning methods, creative tasks, playful learning in language learning, a variety of group work (including digital learning) and outdoor learning. The **practicality of learning methods** is also a transversal keyword, which supports the achievement of learning outcomes and provides a strong basis for applying the lessons learned in the practical working environment. Practicality means, for example, that training uses many real-life examples, which also help the learner to link the new knowledge to "real life" situations and thus better understand what is spoken.

For a number of training providers, **small learning groups** were highlighted as strengths, giving trainers the opportunity to support each learner in a personalised manner and to take account of their specificities. One provider highlighted the idea and depth of the formation of learning groups, which ensures a consistent level of learners for trainers and the best outcome for the learner. In addition, **needs based consultations** are offered depending on the training provider, for example for discussing with each learner their final project, etc. In one company, **free counselling is offered to learners** who encounter difficulties, while for others, the so-called supporters **supporting** the learner's learning and development (career counsellors, mentors, coaches, etc.) were identified as strength. In addition, the assessment decisions put forward **targeted motivating learners and supporting autonomy**: for example, an individual weekly plan is agreed with each learner in one provider, which is monitored by the trainer and with which the learner also assumes responsibility for the achievement of learning outcomes. Learners' reliance is also reflected, for example, by **taking into account learners' work schedules set out in the assessment decision and in offering opportunities for hybrid learning**.

Several training providers **continue to support learners after the learning process has been completed**: learners are offered coaching, counselling, consultations, feedback, etc. For example, one assessment decision indicated that the learner would be provided with personalised development support in the form of free counselling and coaching also for up to two months after the end of the training, which supports the development of the trainee beyond the training course alone. Several training providers **also create their own learners' community**

(e.g. Facebook group, Messenger conversations, etc.) that supports participants both during the training (e.g. for team building among learners) and after the end of the training.

A personalised approach to the learner also includes **providing individual feedback**, whether during training or after completion of the training (including assessment), orally or in writing. For many of the providers assessed, **feedback to learners appears to be diverse, consistent, comprehensive and meaningful**. Feedback during the training allows to receive ongoing information from the participant in order to make operational changes to the learning process where necessary and adapt it to learners' needs. Well-designed feedback is of great value to learners, e.g. in cases where a learner can use a final **project to apply for funding, to apply for a job, etc.** A good approach mentioned in the assessment decisions is also **discussing the results of tests, practical tasks, etc. with the learner** – if the answers are wrong, the appropriate solution is immediately found. The assessment decision of one provider pointed out the following:

> *The test situation can always cause anxiety among participants, but anxiety hinders best performance. An approach, in which error is not penalised by failure but rather learning from mistakes, is primarily aimed at learning the learner. /Extract from the assessment decision/*

Transparency, objectivity, practicability and support to the learner were identified as strengths in decisions. For example, in one provider, the members of the examination board at the end of the training are external to the provider, which ensures an independent assessment.

In addition to the feedback provided to learners, **feedback from learners** is also important and is also frequently highlighted in the assessment decision analysed. For many providers, **a well-designed feedback system** was highlighted, allowing to draw regular conclusions on the suitability of curricula, learning material and methodology, as well as on the competence of trainers and their training needs. **The ways in which feedback is collected are diverse**: both oral and written feedback is collected from participants, interviews are initiated, organize debates and more.

> *Learners are encouraged to provide feedback throughout the training and offered different options, including direct feedback during the training at the end of each module, as well as a longer discussion session at the end of the course, after passing the exam. /Extract from the assessment decision/*

One provider, for example, has given access to all trainers to a dedicated cloud environment, where feedback has been collected. In addition, the success of graduates in applying for grants, professional examinations, the labour market, etc is monitored. **Documenting and analysis of the feedback s** (in particular with trainers) and **its use for improvement activities were also highlighted as strengths**.

Trainers and their cooperation were also highlighted among the strengths of learning and teaching. The assessment decisions referred to **trainers' awareness of the curriculum, the themes and methods used, if the training is delivered by multiple trainers**. It was highlighted that cooperation between trainers (including training managers) is systematic and regular: trainers share experiences, turn to each other for advice, share ideas on materials and

opportunities for further training. Changes in the teaching and learning process tailored to learners' needs can also be implemented in cooperation.

> *Around 8 trainers' co-creation days per year are organized, where the trainers work together on the development of trainings, curricula, updating of learning materials. This close cooperation between trainers ensures that curricula are implemented in a uniform manner, by sharing experiences among different trainers teaching the same curriculum, etc./extract from the assessment decision/*

In addition to the trainers, several assessment decisions have also highlighted other support staff: for example, one provider has an administrator supporting the whole learning process, whose support to learners is crucial, in particular in terms of familiarising learners with learning environments and supporting learners' digital competences.

Areas of improvement of learning and teaching in the 2023 assessment decisions

The improvement areas in the field of learning and teaching have been identified in the assessment decisions on 186 occasions. There are **a number of challenges in the providers assessed in terms of supporting learners**: for example, the objective of learning, learning outcomes and assessment are not discussed with the learners before the start of the training. A number of decisions pointed out that the **learning methods used are not relevant, inclusive and varied** – for example, too few different methods are used during a lengthy course, which, according to experts who have assessed providers, lead to learning fatigue and a decrease in learning motivation. In some providers, support for learners has not been given due consideration and is random, the learner is left to their own devices.

> *Both curricula are clearly structured as a consultative process, building on the trainer's own practical experience. Every learner has the opportunity to ask for help in person at any time, but asking for help on one's own initiative and managing one's own learning does not come naturally to everyone. Shier learners (especially when the learner comes through the Unemployment Insurance Fund) may not have enough courage to ask for help and agree on the [time for consultation] themselves and may therefore be deprived of the support of the trainer. The panel recommends agreeing with the learner on the specific regularity and timing of counselling from the start of the training. This will motivate learners to do homework by an agreed deadline and the trainer can better manage their own time. /Extract from the assessment decision/*

In the curricula assessed, there were often **problems with learning outcomes and their assessment**. In some cases, there were too many learning outcomes or issues with their wording were identified – for example, one assessment decision stated that learning outcomes were formulated as activities. However, there were also cases where (significant) learning outcomes were missing from the curriculum.

> *As the learning outcomes of all curricula cover only a small part of the subjects covered by the curricula, it is not clear whether and how the learner has also acquired important topics that are not covered by the learning outcomes. /Extract from the assessment decision/*

In providers that have received a negative assessment decision, the main area of improvement concerns the **lack or difficulty of assessing the achievement of all learning outcomes** during the delivery, which in turn leads to a failure in achieving (some of the) learning outcomes. On the basis of assessment decisions, one of the reasons for this is the excessive flexibility in the delivery of the curriculum.

> *Lecturers are not strictly guided by the curriculum and address the subjects included in the curriculum too flexibly, based on, in particular, background of the trainers, their involvement and interest in different matters. As lecturers adapt themes according to a particular group, it may be that not all the knowledge needed to achieve learning outcomes is acquired in a uniform manner in the different training groups. /Extract from the assessment decision/*

Problems relating to the assessment of achievement of learning outcomes can be attributed to shortcomings in assessment methods and criteria. Assessment decisions highlighted, for example, **poor assessment methods** (e.g. poorly designed test questions that do not provide an indication of the learner's knowledge and achievement of learning outcomes). In several cases**, the curriculum described assessment methods that are not actually applied, or vice versa** – for example, students take an oral examination, but this is not mentioned in the curriculum as part of the assessment methods. Frequently, the **chosen assessment method(s) were not suitable for assessing the achievement of (all) learning outcomes of the curriculum.**

> *The only method for assessing learning outcomes in the curriculum is a written test, which is not an appropriate assessment method for the assessment of achievement of learning outcomes defined as practical skills. /Extract from the assessment decision/*

Assessment decisions also highlighted situations where **assessment methods are not uniform for all learners**. For example, some providers allow learners to choose which tasks they will execute during an exam.

> *During the practical exam, the learner chooses which tasks (welding methods, positions) he/she will weld in the exam. However, in order to ensure that the examination is the same for all learners (equal in terms of content and expected level of achievement), we recommend that for both curricula a precise definition of the task(s) to be performed during the practical exam should be defined. /Extract from the assessment decision/*

As an area of improvement, the assessment decisions mentioned, inter alia, **different perceptions of assessment methods within the provider**. For example, in one of the assessed providers, the trainers and the head of training had not agreed how and when to apply the assessment method (e.g. whether the students would take the test in writing or orally, after each module or at the end of the curriculum). In conclusion, it was clear from the assessment decisions that **a number of providers lacked understanding of the assessment methods and criteria** (for example, one was taken for the other).

In many curricula there are no **clear assessment criteria** in the assessment methods – for example, the trainer decides on positive performance on their own gut instinct, experience, etc., leading to subjective assessment. It was also pointed out as a weakness that **assessment criteria do not support the achievement of learning outcomes.** Thus, one assessment decision

found that the assessment criterion set out in the curriculum 'shall be deemed to have been passed when 51 % have been correctly answered' does not ensure the achievement of all learning outcomes, as the level of knowledge at this level is not sufficient. In a few cases, the criteria lacked thresholds for positive performance.

One of the most common shortcomings in assessment decisions was **feedback to learners and from learners**. In continuing training providers there are situations where **learners do not receive feedback on their learning** or receive it only if they express their wish to receive it. Several providers do not clearly define how feedback is provided to learners, which is why the feedback is random and does not support the learner's progress.

Even more areas of improvement concerned feedback from learners, in particular the quality of its collection. A significant number of providers **do not have a feedback** system, i.e. the provider does not request any form of feedback from learners. In others, the **collection of feedback is irregular and random**.

> *Requesting feedback is chaotic and does not give the trainer meaningful and constructive feedback. The Panel recommends putting in place arrangements for collecting and analysing feedback in the development of the training provider – how often are the structure of the feedback form and the questions reviewed, how often are feedback analyses produced, how the information is shared with trainers, how feedback is utilized in development activities. /Extract from the assessment decision/*

Written forms are the most common way of collecting feedback, but their analysis revealed a number of shortcomings. **Feedback forms are often unstructured and superficial, for example by asking** learners to give feedback on a small part of the training.

> *The Agency collects feedback from learners mainly on the overall training satisfaction and activities of the lecturer The feedback questionnaire of the training provider does not cover all aspects of the training. For example, questions regarding satisfaction of learners with the content, methods, assessment and volume of learning are missing. The Panel recommends that the training provider amends the feedback questionnaire by including important topics such as learning content, methods, assessment and volume of learning. /Extract from the assessment decision/*

There are also problems with the answers to the form (e.g. biased, unbalanced scale, only numerical feedback). Several forms are used in some providers, making it difficult to analyse feedback. The assessment decisions also described a few cases where learners fill in feedback before they are issued final documents, which could affect the objectivity of the feedback.

Some providers only ask for feedback orally, but there is no structured system (e.g. specific questions). Among other things, **oral feedback is often not documented or used to improve the curriculum**. It is the use of feedback for improvement activities that was repeatedly mentioned in the assessment decisions. This means that **feedback is collected by the providers, but it is not analysed or used to improve curricula or the activities of the training provider**.

The main **issues identified in the assessment decisions relate to the completion of the curriculum and the documents issued**. For example, the conditions for graduation are not

properly described – i.e. the descriptions that the learner has to do in order to complete the curriculum were missing, misleading or incorrect.

> *The curriculum states that learners who have achieved learning outcomes are allowed to take the final examination. Such a requirement cannot be imposed on the learner, as the achievement of learning outcomes must be verified during the final examination. /Extract from the assessment decision/*

The most problematic issues mentioned in the assessment reports were the documents to be issued. **In a very large number of curricula there was no information about the notice of participation**. This means that curricula do not set out the conditions under which a notice of participation is issued to learners. Under Sections 2(1)(9) and 3(1) of the standard for continuing education, the learner must in any case be issued a notice of participation (e.g. if the learner did not achieve learning outcomes or was not assessed). In some cases, the lack of a certificate in situations where learning outcomes are assessed was also highlighted under areas of improvement. In some curricula, information about both the notice of participation and the certificate are missing – that is to say, the curriculum does not indicate the conditions under which learners are to be issued a notice of participation or a certificate. In one provider, learners are given a 'certification' or a 'certificate of competence' instead of the required document(s), while this is not correct; in others, the learner will only be issued a certificate if the learner expresses their wish for it.

The assessment decisions repeatedly mentioned situations where the information **about the certificate and/or notice of participation** (including the information on the documents themselves) was **incorrect.** For example, assessment decisions described situations where a certificate is issued but the achievement of (all) learning outcomes is not assessed and/or the learner failed to achieve all learning outcomes. In some cases, the certificate lacked essential information:

> *The certificate issued at the end of the training lacks information on the volume of continuing training, the learning outcomes acquired and the ways in which the learning outcomes were assessed. The name of the trainer is also missing. /Extract from the assessment decision/*

The areas of improvement also highlighted situations where the **description of the issuance of documents in the documents does not correspond to reality**: for example, in order to obtain a certificate, the learner must perform tasks other than those described in the conditions for issuing the final documents. Diverging information in various documents (e.g. on the website and the document describing the principles for organizing trainings) was also mentioned in the assessment decisions – that is to say, information on which documents and under which conditions the learner will receive at completion is different in different places.

2.3. Trainers

Trainers' strengths in the 2023 assessment decisions

Strengths have been mentioned 70 times under the assessment area of trainers in assessment decisions. The **competence of the trainers** was most commonly mentioned among the strengths. Many providers employ experienced trainers with good training (including professional or adult

education training, higher education) and long-term professional experience both as a trainer and as a professional in the field to be taught. The strengths listed included practical experience of trainers and flexible support provided to learners with different knowledge, skills and needs, including special needs.

> *All trainers have an outstandingly comprehensive and good practical background and are genuine professionals in their field, who clearly perceive their responsibility and role in delivering high-quality training. /Extract from the assessment decision/*

Assessment decisions also highlighted the **regular skills development** of trainers, including in areas that contribute not only to the trainers' sectoral competences but also to the development of knowledge and skills related to supporting learners. **Provider's support is essential** for the trainers' self-development. The assessment decisions indicated that the providers conduct development interviews with trainers, organise trainings and seminars for their staff and reimburse their participation in trainings, conferences and trips abroad. They also promote the dissemination of competences in-house, e.g. by organising peer training seminars or encouraging participation in colleague's training courses. Individual training providers also work with universities to gain the most up-to-date teaching knowledge.

Analysis of **feedback on training and planning of improvement activities with trainers** is also part of supporting self-development. This means that providers monitor the quality of training (i.e. learners' feedback) and the competences of the trainers and their development. The development of trainers is strongly supported by a number of providers for the **entry level trainers**, e.g. in the preparation of training by management, mentor support, etc. This is preceded in some providers by a thorough **recruitment process** (e.g. criteria have been developed for the selection of trainers). Some companies have a **good support system** (e.g. Digital Education Manager, Learning Quality Manager, Methodologist) where the trainer can receive help when needed. **Career models** have been developed for experienced trainers **(**e.g. the provider has defined roles, expectations and requirements for mentor-trainer, programme manager, lead trainer, etc.) and **recognition systems** (e.g. the acquisition of qualification levels is encouraged by raising the salary level).

Assessment decisions also highlighted the **cooperation between trainers** (including traineeship instructors) under the assessment field of trainers:

> *There is a specific and clear division of the subjects to be addressed by the trainers on the basis of competence. /Extract from the assessment decision/*

As a good practice, one assessment decision mentioned that the training provider itself trains **traineeship instructors**. In this way, traineeship supervisors are more aware of their role and responsibilities.

Areas of improvement for trainers in the 2023 assessment decisions

Areas for improvement in the field of trainers have been identified 89 times in assessment decisions. Almost half of the assessment decisions have identified, as an area of improvement, **missing information on trainers** on the training provider's website, curriculum or other documents. Under Section 8(2) of the Adult Education Act, the continuing training provider must publish on its website the names of the adult trainers involved in the training, together with a description of their qualifications, learning or professional experience attesting their competence. However, many training providers **have published (partially) incomplete information** (e.g. describing the trainer's educational path but not providing information on his/her professional experience) or **there is no information about the background of (some of the) trainers.**

When deciding to enrol on a course, it is important for a potential learner to have adequate information on the competence of the trainers. The curricula on the website contain the names of the trainers, but different types of information are provided for different trainers, and not all of them provide an adequate overview of the trainers' qualifications, learning or work experience. For all trainers in both curricula, the website also lacks information on adult education training completed by the trainers. We recommend providing the necessary information on all trainers (including substitutes) in both curricula on the website: education, work experience, further professional training (including adult education experience). /Extract from the assessment decision/

In a few cases, Estonian-language information was not (partially) available on the websites.

Some assessment decisions, the lack of **competence of the trainers**, was mentioned, which often did not meet the conditions set by the training provider itself (e.g. those described in the principles for organizing studies). In one case, it was pointed out, for example, as an area of improvement, that the trainer's knowledge of curriculum development, the formulation of learning outcomes, regulations, etc. were outdated meaning that **trainers do not regularly engage in self-development** activities. This may also sometimes be linked to the attitude of the management of the provider, for example, in one decision it was assessed that the **provider does not consider it important to develop and analyse the competences of the adult educator in a targeted and informed manner**. Under competence, the lack of adult training competences (including a qualification) was also mentioned on several occasions:

The trainer does not have a qualification as adult educator and experience is limited to one training. The Panel recommends directing the trainer to improve the knowledge of adult education. /Extract from the assessment decision/

The use of teaching methods in training is also linked to the competences of the trainers. In this regard, assessment decisions noted that **trainers' methods are sometimes not up-to-date, learner-centred or evidence-based**. Some trainers do not use motivating and inclusive learning methods and assign great responsibility to the learner themselves.

2.4. Resources

Strengths of resources in the 2023 assessment decisions

The assessment panels identified 33 strengths under the Resources assessment area. Training environments, tools and support were seen as strengths of resources. Providers, which were recognized, have created a modern and practical learning environment, where the starting point for planning of a training is the objective to support learning and to ensure that learning tools, needs arising from learning methodologies and occupational health requirements, etc. are met. In addition, providers offering learners the choice of learning environments were recognised. These were hybrid learning trainings where learners could choose whether to attend the training physically or virtually. Recognition was also given to providers that ensure accessibility to the spaces also in a wheelchair.

In terms of resources, for example possibilities of renting a computer for learning or using study programmes free of charge were recognized. The various online environments Zoom, Teams, Tarkus, Weldtech, which were used not only to convey material but also to engage learners, monitor their development and motivate them through different tasks were also positively noted. In terms of tools, trainings that could be watched on demand for learners to internalize what they had learned, were mentioned as well as those where social media groups had been set up where learners were

able to communicate and get support from teachers and peers. One training provided learners with dedicated e-books as a gift. Many training providers have developed supportive videos and online learning materials, some have taken a step forward and have developed support services to further support learner learning.

For example, technical assistant support is provided for learning in online environments, a video and textual guide on how to use the online environment has been created, and the development of learners' digital competences is supported throughout the training. In addition, the websites of several providers were recognized for user-friendly presentation of information, clarity and easy access.

Areas of improvement of resources in the 2023 assessment decisions

The assessment panels identified 16 areas for improvement in the area of resources. The assessment panels noted a lack of descriptions of the learning environment (including accessibility of premises) and/or learning tools in the curricula. The correct language use on the website was also mentioned, which, for one provider, was very poor and made it considerably difficult to understand.

Traineeships and practical activities are also one of the stumbling blocks. In the case of traineeships, there is a lack of agreements on principles for the conduct of traineeships, it is not clear how learners will be sent to the traineeship, how the selection of traineeship organisation and the preparation of trainees will take place, so it is not possible to ensure the same level of preparation for all learners when traineeship organisations are of different levels and preparedness. Similarly, some providers do not have traineeship agreements where the rights and obligations of the parties are fixed, making it difficult to ensure quality traineeships. In several cases it has happened that the traineeship organisation or the training provider itself lack the capacity to teach the skills included in the curriculum. There is a lack of learning resources (e.g. cleaning supplies, kitchenware and technology, computers, etc.) and the environment that supports achievement of learning outcomes.

3.   Summary and conclusions

Curricula are the main bottleneck for training providers

Curriculum and curriculum development proved to be the assessment area that the panels focussed on most, identifying around 450 strengths and areas of improvement. More than 80 % were improvement areas. The biggest number of suggestions for improvement were made on the curricula. The assessment decisions revealed that, in almost half of the areas of improvement, the necessary information (volume of learning, learning outcomes, entry conditions, etc.) is missing from the curriculum or provided in an ambiguous way, meaning that the learner does not get the full picture of the curriculum. The relevance and clarity of the content of the curriculum, as well as the consistency between the different components, were also a major challenge for the providers. There were also difficulties in the implementation of curricula, where there were inconsistencies between written and delivered curricula, which often means that the learners do not get what is promised to them. These results confirm the results of previous quality assessments, which have also highlighted that curricula are the biggest challenge for continuing raining providers (Kumpas-Lenk, 2023; Kumpas-Lenk et al., 2020). At the same time, progress can be seen – many providers have very good curricula. The assessment panels recognised the providers whose curricula were conceived as practical, took into account the target group of the training and supported a personalised approach and learning focus and had been delivered in line with promises.

The assessment panels saw the lack of a system and the lack of consideration of feedback or needs of the various actors involved as a bottleneck in curriculum development. At the same time the assessment panels recognized the providers whose curriculum development process was well based on analysis, followed the logic of continuous improvement, responding to the expectations and needs of the various stakeholders. Curriculum developers were professional and committed.

In conclusion, curricula and their development remain one of the main topics that continuing training providers need to address. It is quite easy to improve a curriculum description by adding missing information or by making it clearer. By contrast, the challenges of curriculum content, coherence and delivery are those for which a more in-depth approach by training providers is needed as well as awareness of learning and teaching, output-based learning and teaching. Likewise, the training provider needs curriculum design skills. At the same time, more and more good practices are emerging from which providers can be learn and they are worthwhile sharing among continuing training providers.

Supporting the achievement of learning outcomes poses challenges

Under the assessment area of learning and teaching, the assessment decisions identified a total of 330 strengths and areas of improvement. Just over half of them were shortcomings. The most often mentioned area of improvement relates to the completion of the curriculum and the documents to be issued. Descriptions of what the learner needs to do in order to complete the training were often missing, misleading or incorrect. In a very large number of curricula there was a lack of information on the notice of participation, the requirement of which stems from the continuing training standard. The assessment decisions also repeatedly mentioned situations where the information about and/or on the certificate and/or the notice of participation is incorrect. These areas of improvement are rather 'technical deficiencies', which all providers would be able to rectify.

In the curricula assessed, there were also problems with learning outcomes and their assessment. In providers that received a negative assessment decision, the main area of improvement concerned the failure to assess the achievement of all learning outcomes in the course of delivery. There were

concerns about learning outcomes relating both to assessment methods and criteria, which did not support the achievement of learning outcomes in the curriculum. From this it can be concluded that learning outcomes, methods and criteria (and other elements) are not seen as a whole in the design and delivery of curricula and therefore the providers are not always able to achieve coherence between them.

Important areas for improvement also relate to feedback, giving it to and collecting from learners. A number of providers involved in the assessment did not have a functioning feedback system, which shows that they do not take feedback received from learners and other actors into account in the development of learning and teaching.

Personalized support for learners, including flexible teaching based on learners' expectations and needs, were identified as key strengths. In many providers that received a positive assessment result, the content of learning and teaching is varied according to the level of knowledge and experience of the learner. It is noteworthy that dozens of providers continue to support their learners after the learning process has been completed, demonstrating the provider's commitment to the holistic development of learners. Such providers are also characterized by the desire to develop curricula and improve the quality of learning and teaching, in particular through using feedback from learners.

Trainers are experienced and competent

With regard to the trainers' assessment area, most providers do not have major concerns: trainers are competent, experienced, and committed to their work. They are engaged in regular development, which is also actively supported by many employers (i.e. training providers). At the same time, one of the main problems in this area is related to the "technical" aspect – information about trainers is often not available to learners because it is incomplete. However, information about the trainer's background is important for learners to be able to make an informed decision about enrolling on the curriculum.

Training providers create learning-friendly training environments

Resources are an assessment area with which most training providers have no problems. The assessment panels highlighted the smallest number of strengths and areas of improvement. The lack of information on the training environment and tools were mentioned as areas of improvement. Strengths, on the other hand, included a tailor-made, flexible and learning-friendly training environment, tools and support with the online environment.

General findings and recommendations

- The analysis of the improvement areas and strengths presented in the assessment decisions identified two issues that need to be highlighted. The results include thematic repetitions, e.g. the collection of feedback was referred to in the curriculum and curriculum development as well as under of learning and teaching, and consequently they were addressed under both assessment areas. The content and level of detail of the strengths and areas of improvement is quite different, as assessment panels assessed different providers, looking at the accessibility of the premises, traineeship contracts, etc. This means that there are topics in the analysis on which the assessment panels have had different approaches and therefore not all results can be generalised. At the same time, assessment areas and criteria have provided sufficient guidance to identify the main themes of strengths and improvement areas that should be addressed by continuing training providers.

- Assessment decisions show that many providers need continued support to provide high-quality learning and teaching. A number of good practices have been identified as strengths in the assessment decisions, which should be highlighted and presented to other continuing training providers. For example, HAKA could take a leading role in disseminating best practices of providers, organize thematic discussions and experience sharing cafés for trainers.

- Many of the improvement areas highlighted in assessment decisions, such as the comprehensive description of the conditions for entering studies or the inclusion of information on receiving the notice of participation in the curriculum, are relatively simple and feasible changes. However, it is important not only to emphasise their inclusion in the curriculum, but also to deepen the understanding of these requirements. Clarification should focus on how the information provided contributes to ensuring a smoother and more transparent learning process for learners.

- Including learners' feedback in the assessment process, would add depth to the assessment results, would also provide an opportunity to make the topics that have received less attention but are central and crucial to the quality of learning, such as. programme delivery, learning and teaching, more visible. It is possible that some curriculum topics may have received less attention in current assessment decisions, as they are less easily visible than a curriculum document for which many areas of improvement were noted.

Used materials (in Estonian)

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