

Transitions from Initial Vocational Education and Training Qualifications to Working Life in Finland – Observations and Reflections from an International Expert Panel

6.4 Flexibilisation

The Finnish VET system has a very flexible, modularised and individualised structure that offers all students a personal competence development plan. This includes the recognition of the students' prior learning and adjustments to suit their special learning requirements. It also includes an opportunity for VET providers to adapt education and training to specific local and regional conditions.

The Finnish VET system focuses on the students' common learning outcomes and allows for different individual pathways to attain them. National qualification requirements are determined by the Finnish National Agency for Education and VET providers are subject to regular evaluations of their quality by FINEEC. Employer surveys conducted by the Confederation of Finnish Industries and the Federation of Finnish Enterprises indicate that the graduates' vocational competence and transferable skills corresponded to the companies' expectations either well or moderately.

In relation to the problem of VET graduates' unemployment, the panel considered the possible disadvantages of high flexibility in VET. The matching of education to working life depends on the certification of standardised occupational profiles. With standardised skills profiles of VET graduates, the employers have few costs for screening and assessment of potential employees who can easily be matched with jobs. Standardisation also improves job mobility between companies in the labour market. Therefore, highly differentiated skills profiles of VET graduates could hamper their smooth and fast transition to employment, because their skills are less transparent for employers. Without commonly recognised occupational profiles, the value of the VET certificates in the labour market could be reduced.

In addition, the opportunities for the student to develop strong and common vocational identities could be weakened. The panel also questioned the relevance for young people of each compiling an individual VET programme, considering their lack of experience with the labour

market. Moreover, we question the opportunities and resources of VET teachers to teach and guide students with individually different learning paths.

According to the interviews and documents, the aim is that even while the students' learning paths are individual, their final skills should match the national standards for VET. However, the interviews showed that it is not always clear if the students achieve the same level of learning outcomes set in the qualification requirements, due to these individualised learning paths. It was mentioned in the interviews that certain compulsory studies for everyone ensure that all the students have the same basic skills. At the same time, the interviewees pointed out the risk that if there is too much individualisation, it is of course risky and learning outcomes depend on how much responsibility the individual takes. The interviews also showed that it is difficult for the VET providers and teachers in VET to adapt teaching to the students' different learning paths. It was expressed as follows: "Everything is possible – nothing is easy".

The Finnish VET system is inclusive for both young people and adults and they can study in the same programmes. They all have high flexibility when drawing up their personal competence development plans. However, the panel considers the importance of flexibility and accreditation of prior learning to be different for young and adult students. Young people from lower secondary education have weak backgrounds for drawing up their own personal competence development plan and they have little or no prior learning to be validated. Young people in VET also benefit from being part of a strong social community in a class. Learning is not only an individual process, but also a social process. Students learn together and from each other. This can be difficult when students follow individually divergent learning paths.

The interviews also demonstrated the advantage of the personal competence development plan, as it gave the students a stronger ownership of and responsibility for their education. The interviewees were quite positive about the flexibility, which gave the students opportunities to shift easily between programmes. According to the interviewees, the option to change specialisation during the course of the studies was not well known among students and could be marketed better. Moreover, the option to take part in modules from UASs that facilitate the transition to a UAS was not well known either among students.

In the interviews we learned that some of the individualisation and flexibilisation in the latest reform in 2018 had been rolled back.

Examples of flexibility in other countries illustrates different ways countries balance responsiveness, permeability, modularisation, and labour market alignment.

Denmark: Experiences with flexibility in the Danish VET system

Since a VET reform in 1990, all students in VET start their study by drawing up a personal and flexible study plan (Cedefop, 2025). This was introduced in response to the high diversity of students in VET regarding age and prior work experience. One the one

partly due to the Youth Guarantee and the youth activation policy. Many adults benefitted from shorter study times after having their prior learning recognised. However, some adults preferred to follow the normal-length study programme in order to be part of a continuous social community in VET.

For younger students, the individualisation of VET had the aim of reducing the dropout rate by adapting the study plan to their personal requirements. The results were, however, disappointing as the dropout rate subsequently increased. The personal study plan gave the individual student greater responsibility for completing their own learning path. In addition, it weakened the social learning environment in VET, as each student could follow different learning paths. Many of the most disadvantaged students had difficulties taking responsibility for their personal learning path and suffered from the lack of strong social community with fellow students (Jørgensen, 2016). Furthermore, the teachers had difficulties adapting to the diverse needs of individual students and therefore tended to help the most mature and dedicated students. Some years later, the individualisation was partly rolled back and substituted with more structured programmes with stronger and more stable social environments (Jørgensen et al., 2018).

Recognising that the learning requirements of young and adult students are different, a VET reform in 2015 introduced separate VET programmes for young and adult (> 25 years) students ('EUV'). This benefitted many dedicated adult learners in VET, who did not feel comfortable in classes of mainly young students. However, many young students benefitted from learning together with older peers, who could help them develop a vocational identity and working life skills. In addition, vocational schools in peripheral areas with few students had difficulties filling parallel classes for young and adult students.

This illustrates the complexities of organising flexible and individual learning paths in a VET system with very diverse students and serving many diverse occupational fields. The lessons are that flexibility can have advantages for students, but the flexibility should be adapted to the needs and resources of different learners. In addition, flexibility involves a trade-off between individual learning paths and strong social learning environments, and this should be acknowledged and managed in VET.

Norway: Flexibility mechanisms in the Norwegian VET system

The Norwegian VET system is designed to provide flexible learning pathways that accommodate different learner needs and life situations. A key structural element is the 2+2 model, in which students typically spend two years in school-based education followed by two years of apprenticeship training in a company. The system also allows for further progression: VET graduates may complete an additional supplementary

which allows adults to enter VET through shortened or individually adapted pathways based on previously acquired skills. In addition, political efforts have been made to ensure access to apprenticeship placements, including policies aimed at securing training opportunities for students who wish to complete the work-based component of their studies. Together, these features illustrate how the Norwegian VET system combines structured training with opportunities for progression and flexible access.

Information on flexibility in the Norwegian VET system:

- Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (Udir): The Norwegian Education System – Upper Secondary Education and Training: <https://www.udir.no>
- Norwegian Government: Education Act (Opplæringslova). <https://lovdata.no>
- CEDEFOP (2023): Vocational education and training in Norway – Short description. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- OECD (2019): OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training: Strengthening the Governance of Skills Systems – Norway.

Austria: Flexibility in the Austrian VET system

The Austrian VET system incorporates several mechanisms that allow for flexible learning pathways while maintaining strong links with the labour market. A central component is the dual apprenticeship system, which combines workplace training in companies with part-time vocational schooling and is based on legally regulated training curricula. To increase flexibility within this structure, modular apprenticeships have been introduced in certain occupations. These programmes consist of a basic module, a main module and, where relevant, an optional specialisation module, allowing apprentices to tailor their training to specific occupational profiles.

The system also provides opportunities for educational progression. Apprentices can obtain a university entrance qualification alongside their apprenticeship through additional examinations, enabling access to higher education. For young people who are unable to secure a company-based training placement, the state provides training through publicly funded training centres, ensuring that they can still complete vocational training. In addition, recognition of prior learning allows experienced workers to access qualification examinations and obtain formal certification based on their existing skills. Together, these features illustrate how the Austrian VET system combines strong employer involvement with mechanisms that support flexibility, inclusion and progression.

Information on flexibility in Austrian VET system:

- CEDEFOP (2023): Vocational education and training in Austria – Short description. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Austrian Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy: Apprenticeship Training in Austria (Lehrlingsausbildung). <https://www.bmaw.gv.at>
- Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research: VET in Austria – Facts and Figures.
- OECD (2022): Education at a Glance – Austria Country Note.

Estonia: Flexibility in the Estonian VET system

The Estonian VET system incorporates several mechanisms that support flexible learning pathways and responsiveness to labour market needs. A key feature is the use of modular, learning-outcomes-based curricula, which allows programmes to be structured into smaller units and enables learners to progress through training in a flexible way.

To support informed study choices and reduce early specialisation, Estonia introduced the preparatory studies programmes for basic school graduates in 2018. These programmes focus on strengthening general skills and providing career guidance before students choose a specific vocational field. They do not immediately lead to a full qualification and instead aim to support better-informed decisions and reduce the risk of students dropping out. From 2026 onwards, preparatory vocational study programmes will be offered at both state-owned VET institutions and in general upper secondary schools (gymnasiums). In this sense, while Finland’s highly individualised VET system allows for flexibility mainly within qualifications, Estonia illustrates flexibility at an earlier stage — before specialisation, at the point of entry into vocational education.

Flexibility is further strengthened through a well-established system for recognition of prior learning and work experience (VÕTA), which allows adults to validate competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning and, where appropriate, complete shortened study pathways. In addition, Estonia operates a centralised labour market foresight system (OSKA), coordinated by the Estonian Qualifications Authority. This system produces sector-based forecasts through collaboration with employers and sectoral experts and directly informs state training orders and funding decisions, creating a strong link between skills anticipation and education planning.

According to Cedefop data, Estonia also performs relatively well in labour market outcomes for young graduates: the employment rate of 20–34 year olds with vocational education was around 83.5% in 2022, while unemployment remained below roughly 16.5%. Together, these features illustrate how Estonia combines flexible entry pathways,

recognition of prior learning and data-driven labour market steering within its VET system.

Information about flexibility in the Estonian VET system:

- CEDEFOP (2023): Vocational education and training in Estonia – short description.
- Estonian Ministry of Education and Research: Vocational Education and Training in Estonia. <https://www.hm.ee>
- OECD (2020): Vocational Education and Training in Estonia.
- Eurostat / CEDEFOP data on employment outcomes for VET graduates.