FINNISH EDUCATION EVALUATION CENTRE

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

5.4 Innovative ways to manage the trade-offs for VET

The expert panel above points to two diverging initiatives to reduce IVET students' high graduate unemployment. First, to improve the linkages of IVET to the labour market and improve work-based learning in VET. Secondly, to boost the transition of IVET graduates to further and higher education. These initiatives relate to the dual aims of IVET, which might not be easy to combine. Therefore, upper secondary education in some other European countries has to some extent reserved the aim of preparing for higher education for the general track, and the aim of preparing for employment for the vocational track, the VET system. When both tracks have more unequivocal aims, these can be pursued more easily. However, this involves stronger tracking in upper secondary education, stronger stratification and stronger social background effects on the educational attainment of students (Esser, 2016; Triventi et al., 2016). This does not align with the strong emphasis in Finland on educational equality.

In Finland, the dual aims of IVET means that it simultaneously prepares students for employment and for progression to higher education. This is reflected in key policy documents, like the *Education Policy Report of the Finnish Government, 2021*. It emphasises that the proportion of upper secondary students progressing to higher education should be increased, so that by 2030 at least half of all young adults in Finland complete a higher education degree. The pathway to achieving this includes initiatives like widening the access of IVET graduates to higher education by providing more flexible pathways from IVET to a UASs and recognition of the competencies of IVET graduates at UASs. At the same time, it is emphasised that the links of IVET to the world of work should be strengthened to boost the employment of IVET graduates.

The question is how the relationship between these two different aims of VET is understood and managed by the Finnish VET system. In policy documents and in the interviews, the two aims were mainly seen as easily compatible. Interviewees argued that the strengthening of the basic skills and common subjects in IVET is needed both for successful progression to UASs and for

the graduates' future employment. General and generic skills are required for employment in increasingly complex and interdisciplinary work tasks undergoing rapid technological change.

However, international VET research has demonstrated trade-offs between different aims for VET (Shavit & Müller, 2000; Saar & Martma, 2021). This can be seen in European VET systems where work-based learning placements make up a large part of the programmes (especially dual systems), and it is difficult to provide entrance qualifications for higher education for all students (Deissinger et al., 2013; Levels et al., 2014; Cedefop, 2022). Conversely, the mainly school-based VET systems that provide eligibility for higher education for all VET students find it difficult to provide direct access to the skilled labour market. This is the situation in Finland.

Another trade-off for VET is that preparing the VET students for future changes in working life, further training and lifelong education generally comes at the cost of their immediate employability (Shavit & Müller, 2000; Bol & Werfhorst, 2013). A strong emphasis on specific vocational skills and extended work-based learning in IVET supports graduates' easy access to employment, but it may come at the cost of their long-term employability.

These trade-offs seem to be a common challenge for modern VET systems. The Finnish answer to this is to give priority to social equality and vertical permeability. Upper secondary education has clear tracking between schools (general–vocational), and very few students from IVET get access to universities. However, IVET is not an educational 'dead end', because all VET students are, after graduation, eligible for higher education. The price of this strong linkage to UASs is the prolonged transitions to employment of IVET graduates in Finland.

Other Nordic and European countries have managed the trade-off in different ways, from which Finnish education policy might gain inspiration. Strong linkages to higher education can be combined with strong linkages to the labour market. Apprenticeship programmes in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands have previously not offered direct access to higher education (only to various forms of post-secondary vocational education). However, innovative solutions to this weakness could provide inspiration for developing Finnish youth apprenticeships.

> **Apprenticeship systems and access to higher education - Case Sweden**
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> Sweden in the 1990s extended comprehensive unified schooling and abolished tracking in upper secondary education. This came at the price of higher non-completion rates of students from non-academic backgrounds (similar to what happened in Finland in the same period). In response to this, in 2011 Sweden introduced a separate apprenticeship programme, which has gradually become successful. Even though this was not included in the first place, the apprenticeship programme today offers eligibility for higher

end’. It demonstrates that in countries with no strong tradition of youth apprenticeship systems, such systems can be introduced.

Apprenticeship systems and access to higher education - Case Norway

In 1994, Norway based the VET system on the apprenticeship model and included several initiatives to avoid making it appear to be an educational ‘dead end’. First, after the first two years of mainly school-based training in VET, the students can shift to the general track of upper secondary education and gain entrance qualifications for higher education. Second, students in IVET can in the ordinary four-year course duration acquire eligibility for higher education (in ‘Yrkes- og studiekompetanse’, YSK). Third, after IVET students complete their two-year apprenticeships they can continue on a one-year course that gives eligibility for higher education. Fourth, some higher vocational education institutions offer special programmes for VET graduates (Y-veien) (Schmees, et al., 2025). These initiatives may explain why IVET in Norway has maintained high enrolment levels comparable to enrolment levels in Finland (Høst, 2014).

Apprenticeship systems and access to higher education - Case Denmark

Denmark maintained the most traditional type of apprenticeship system with very strong links to the labour market and weak connections to higher education. Therefore, IVET appeared to be a ‘dead end’ and enrolment declined. In response to this, the VET system in 2011 introduced a new EUX pathway based on the apprenticeship model, with longer periods of school-based learning that give eligibility for higher education. These qualifications are to some extent provided in an integrated form, as hybrid qualifications (Deissinger et al. 2013). EUX is provided in all fields of VET and has become quite popular for young people, because it offers a journeyman’s certificate and entrance qualification for studies at tertiary level (Jørgensen, 2017).

Apprenticeship systems and access to higher education - Case The Netherlands and German speaking countries

The Dutch VET system represents an interesting mixed model with two parallel types of learning paths, one mainly school based (BOL) and one apprenticeship based (BBL). In apprenticeships, students combine work-based learning (at least 60% of study time) with

young people, but more than half of all apprentices are above the age of 23 years. The school-based and apprenticeship pathways in IVET culminate in diplomas that have equivalent status. Both tracks are provided at four different levels (resp. one-, two-, three- and four-year courses). All level four courses (both school based and apprenticeship) provide access to higher vocational education. This demonstrates that apprenticeships can offer a viable and attractive pathway for both young people and adults, parallel to a mainly school-based pathway, and offer the same diplomas.

The German speaking countries with dual systems also demonstrate cases for apprenticeships that provide access to higher education. In Austria, this is the *Lehre mit Matura*, in Switzerland the *Berufsmaturität* and in Germany similar programmes are provided by vocational colleges (Deissinger, et al., 2013).