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

4.1 The importance of work-based learning – potential and trade-offs

The Finnish model is institutionally school-based, with apprenticeships as a flexible alternative rather than the core structure of IVET. An effective way to support the employment of graduates from IVET is by preparing the students for working life through work-based learning during the programmes. Through work-based learning the students can:

- Develop working life skills by participating in authentic productive work tasks.
- Develop a vocational identity by socialising with experienced and skilled colleagues.
- Build social networks that can help them gain employment after graduation. Good work-based learning can play a role in finding employment because work-based learning can form an important part of the student's social network (*Interview*).
- Acquire company-specific skills that enable them to gain employment in the company providing the training.

Work-based learning can be organised in different forms of internships, traineeships and apprenticeships. The highest effects on subsequent employment of work-based learning in IVET are attained when the students participate in authentic productive work processes and are recognised as participants in a community of practice in the workplace. This is most fully realised when the IVET student has the status of employee and receives a wage paid by the company, similarly to other colleagues, as is the norm in Germany, Denmark and Norway. In the Finnish VET system more widely, the trainees are mostly not recognised as employees (Rosin, 2025). However, we find clear indications of the positive effects of current apprenticeships in Finland on subsequent employment. *"One year after graduation, the employment rate of those who had completed their qualification through apprenticeship training was 89%, while the employment rate of other qualification holders was 61%."* (Hievanen et al., 2024:2).

In school-based and state-led VET systems like that in Finland, work-based learning is usually an important part of the qualification requirements, but still carries less weight than in dual systems. However, there are strong differences across sectors: In the health care and

restaurant sector, for example, this is much better organised (*Interview*). Generally, the transition to the labour market is for most students left to the individual after completion of the programme (Ahola, 2012). International research has demonstrated that VET systems that include and support the transition to employment as part of the VET programmes have lower unemployment among IVET graduates (Gangl, 2001; Van der Velden & Wolbers, 2003; Marczuk, 2024; Schmid, et al., 2023). This effect is highest in apprenticeship systems, where the apprentices learn in workplaces as employees for extended periods during the VET programmes. IVET in Norway and Denmark is based on the apprenticeship model, and there more than half of all IVET graduates continue as regular employees in their training company directly after completion (Jørgensen & Tønder, 2018). They have already completed their transition to employment when they complete the IVET programme.

The structure of apprenticeship programmes in Europe varies considerably when it comes to the structure of governance, apprentices' status as students/employees, their participation in workplace communities and the combination of school-based and work-based learning (Markowitsch & Wittig, 2022). In the Finnish VET system "*All qualifications can be acquired through apprenticeship training",* but only 9% of IVET students are studying on apprenticeship programmes, and the number has decreased (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019:7). Apprenticeships in Finland are mainly aimed at adults. Apprenticeships function more as a continuing training route for employed adults than as a primary transition pathway from school to work**.** In neighbouring Estonia the situation is the same, with apprenticeships not a dominant entry pathway for young IVET students. Various structural, economic and cultural observations can be made about the role and challenges of apprenticeships in Finland.

The programmes for other students in VET in Finland include work-based learning, but no minimum requirements for the duration are set and the regulatory framework could be further strengthened. At the moment the requirement is *"as much as possible" (Interview)*, while previously it was at least 30 competence points. The argument for dropping the minimum requirement is that sectors are different (*Interview*), although setting these minimum requirements is quite normal in other countries such as Denmark, Estonia and the Netherlands. The assessment of students in IVET is organised through competence demonstrations in a workplace in collaboration with companies, and students are in most cases satisfied with the implementation of competence demonstrations (Hievanen et al., 2022).

In recent decades, many European countries with mainly school-based VET systems have tried to implement or expand apprenticeships, some supported by the European Alliance for Apprenticeships, which Finland is associated with. The Finnish and Swedish VET systems are, in comparative VET research, categorised as state-led and mainly school-based. Much of this research has emphasised the continuity and path-dependency of national VET systems, but it has also studied the development of mixed VET systems that combine elements from different models of VET.

It is a major strength of the Finnish IVET system that it offers eligibility for higher education for all students, and this is difficult in apprenticeships due to the long periods of work-based learning (Deissinger et al., 2013). However, institutional innovation in continental VET systems and in the Nordic countries demonstrates that apprenticeships can be combined with acquiring

entrance qualifications for higher education (a third *påbygningsår* year in Norway, the ‘EUX’ programme in Denmark, the ‘BBL-level 4’ programme in the Netherlands).

Sweden: Reinventing apprenticeships

Sweden demonstrates that it is possible to reinvent apprenticeships with some success in a VET system that had previously abandoned them (Panican & Paul, 2019; Andersson, et al., 2015; Olofsson & Panican, 2019). After a long period of local experimentation, Sweden in 2011 introduced a national apprenticeship programme, which after a slow start currently accounts for more than 13% of all VET students. When the programme was introduced, a reform limited the eligibility of IVET graduates to higher education. Currently, all students in IVET are offered eligibility for higher education.