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

4.3 Trade-offs for policies to strengthen work-based learning in VET

The Nordic model of education emphasises that all students should have an opportunity to progress to higher levels of education. This contrasts with the interest in providing separate 'practical' and less demanding programmes for disadvantaged students in work-based programmes and apprenticeships that can be 'dead ends' in the education system (Triventi et al., 2016).

Compared to the other Nordic countries, upper secondary vocational education in Finland has strong linkages to higher vocational education and offers eligibility for progression to tertiary level for all students in VET. While this is an advantage for the students, the strong linkages to higher education are usually associated with weak linkages to the labour market.

Strengthening the linkages between VET and the labour market by increasing specific vocational skills and work-based learning can weaken the links to higher education. This was a result of the Swedish reform of VET in 2011, which aimed at strengthening the links to the labour market. An unintended consequence of this reform was reducing the level of esteem associated with and enrolment in IVET (Hall, 2012).

In general, the promotion of smooth transitions to employment tends to reduce transitions to higher education, especially in apprenticeship systems, where most of the training programme is located in workplaces. The acquisition of a broad range of specific vocational skills tends to come at the expense of advanced general qualifications. However, these trade-offs are not static and can to some degree be overcome through innovative policies. For example, by combining vocational and general skills in hybrid-type integrated programmes, like the EUX programme in Denmark, the *Lehre mit Matura* in Austria (Deissinger et al., 2013), the Dutch BBL-level 4 or the Swedish apprenticeship programme that offers eligibility for higher education.

The strong links of IVET in Finland to higher education are also associated with less inclusion of non-academic young people, as concluded by Ollikainen & Karhunen in their analysis of the effects of the Finnish VET reforms (2021:9).*"The results highlight a trade-off between higher demands placed on students and increased drop-out rates, which should be acknowledged by policy makers when designing educational reforms.*" This result is in line with the effects of a similar reform to increase the permeability from VET to higher education in Sweden in the early 1990s (Hall, 2012).

Extending work-based learning in IVET can improve students' employment chances after graduation. It can also improve the inclusion of disadvantaged young people in VET. However, extending work-based learning, especially through apprenticeship programmes, tends to weaken the links to higher education. Providing access to employment or to higher education represents a trade-off for VET policy (Bol & Van de Werfhorst, 2013; Jørgensen, 2018). In comparative research, this has been expressed as a trade-off between VET being a safety net and a diversion from higher education (Shavit & Müller, 2000).

"The safety net effect (sheltering from unemployment and unskilled jobs) of VET is observable mostly in countries with highest occupational specificity of VET (in countries with dual systems)" (Saar & Martma, 2021:439). An indicator of the strength of institutional linkages between the VET system and the employment system is the specificity of the employment of IVET graduates (Blommaert, et al., 2020). In Denmark, this varies significantly between occupational fields, with, for example, a large majority (> 75%) of VET graduates from the electrician, carpenter, hairdresser and elder care programmes being employed in the specific industries that also train most of the apprentices in these vocational programmes. In contrast, the employment of office clerk graduates from IVET are less specific and they are dispersed over many different occupational fields.

Extending work-based learning in IVET can also give rise to stronger and earlier tracking in upper secondary education and thereby stronger reproduction of socioeconomic background in education (van de Werfhorst, 2018; Schindler et al., 2024). In addition, the advantages of work-based learning and specific vocational skills for the immediate employment of IVET graduates seem to be associated with lower flexibility and long-term employment rates (Bol & Van de Werfhorst, 2013).

Currently, no minimum requirements are set for the duration of work-based learning in Finland, because this is meant to be adapted to the individual student's needs and interests. In line with other European countries, Finland has introduced flexible and individual learning paths in VET with modularised qualifications emphasising students' ability to choose and to combine subjects even across the vocational and academic tracks of upper secondary education (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020). This flexibility can make it easier to include various opportunities for work-based learning in the VET programmes. However, it can also reduce the transparency of the IVET programmes for students and employers and reduce the education-to-job matching (Levels et al, 2014). This constitutes a trade-off for policy between individually tailored learning pathways that can make IVET more attractive for young people, and loss of transparency of IVET and thereby also the portability of skills in the labour market.

While apprenticeships support the transition to employment very effectively, they are also associated with higher dropout rates and lower completion rates (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019:15). In Norway and Denmark, the apprenticeship programmes start with one or two years of school-based training. The transition from this school-based part of IVET to becoming employed as an apprentice in a workplace involves a risk of students dropping out. This can be due to difficulties in finding an apprenticeship placement and in fitting into the social environment of the workplace with adults. This risk can explain why the non-completion rate of students in upper secondary education is significantly higher in Denmark and Norway than in Finland and Sweden (Albaek, et al., 2015). This indicates that the extension of work-based learning and apprenticeships in IVET involves trade-offs for policy.

Work-based VET is generally more socially inclusive for disadvantaged young people than school-based VET. However, apprenticeships in particular tend to be less inclusive for gender and ethnic minorities (Imdorf, 2017). Gender segregation is generally stronger in vocational education than in general education (Estévez-Abe, 2012; Reisel et al., 2015). One reason is that apprenticeships are mostly distributed through informal social networks and a training market, and access to apprenticeships is difficult for ethnic and gender minorities.

These and other trade-offs for policy have been observed in a variety of VET systems. However, they can be managed and to some extent overcome through policy innovation and through learning from good examples from other countries (Jørgensen, 2018). It should be observed that it takes time to realise VET reforms, as the Swedish apprenticeship reform, for example, has demonstrated.

There are various barriers to the expansion of apprenticeships. In industries with no prior tradition of apprenticeships, employer interest can be limited, while they might be more engaged in the traditional crafts and construction industry. An evaluation in Finland found that employers were not sufficiently aware of the potential of apprenticeship agreements (Hievanen et al., 2022). In addition, the interest of young people in apprenticeships might be limited, as we have seen in Sweden, even in industries with labour shortages (Skolverket, 2021:33). Developing an apprenticeship programme can also be constrained by lack of qualified VET teachers, as seen in Sweden.