

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

### 5 Transitions to universities of applied sciences and their impact on graduate unemployment

It is a key strength of the Finnish VET system that it offers eligibility for higher education for all students. In contrast to the situation in many other European countries, IVET in Finland does not look like a ‘dead end’ in the education system. When young people leaving lower secondary education choose IVET, they do not have to fear becoming locked into a specific occupation. They can continue, not only in further and specialist VET, but also at UASs and universities. It is considerably more common for IVET graduates to continue their studies at a UAS than at a university. This is one reason why VET in Finland has retained a high esteem and high enrolment of young people (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2022).

The VET system in Finland offers a pathway to higher education that is considered more flexible and less pressurised than general upper secondary education and thus represents a good option for practice-oriented students (Knight et al., 2022). VET provides a pathway to higher education for young people from non-academic families and can thereby reduce social inequalities in higher education enrolment (Haltia, et al., 2022).

Students who graduate from IVET have two main options: they can seek skilled employment or progress to higher education. This is especially important in occupational fields that have high graduate unemployment rates and for all fields in periods of cyclical downturns. If IVET graduates have difficulties finding an adequate job, they can apply for a study place, for example at a UAS. Frequently, they can continue their studies in the same field where they achieved their IVET certificate and can maintain continuity in their career plans. Progressing to a UAS can be a new and upward career opportunity for graduates who face a risk of unemployment. This is important, as long-term unemployment can have serious negative effects on graduates’ later labour market careers.

UASs have a strong tradition of recruiting and educating VET graduates as almost half of all UAS students have a background in VET. UASs are interested in taking in more graduates from

VET (*interview*) and many UASs provide additional support in the first year for students coming from VET (*interview*).

Even though the general qualifications of graduates from IVET are lower, their completion rate at UASs is at the same level as students from general upper secondary education (Hakamäki-Stylman et al., 2024). One interviewee stated that higher education institutions are autonomous and do not necessarily recognise the skills acquired through VET (*interview*). However, others find that the UASs generally recognise vocational competence, work experience and workplace skills as strengths in students from VET (Hakamäki-Stylman et al., 2024). These students generally have weaker skills in general academic subjects, like maths and sciences, but they have stronger skills in the vocational subjects and in addition, they may have experiences from working life. They can contribute positively to the learning environments at UASs with their vocational skills in collaboration with students from general upper secondary education (*interview*).

The opportunities for progression to a UAS are not just an advantage for the individual IVET student; they can also help to reduce unemployment of VET graduates. In some sectors, like arts & humanities and ICT, unemployment is high and the proportion of graduates who are full-time students is also high. In contrast, in engineering, services, natural sciences and other similar areas, unemployment is high, but the proportion of full-time students is low or moderate. Here, there could be potential for raising the progression rate to UASs or specialist vocational qualifications. It could be relevant to examine why the transition rate to UASs in some fields is low or moderate, even when graduate unemployment is high.

- Are these fields lacking relevant vocational progression routes and destinations (as was the case in Denmark, where new short-cycle tertiary programmes were introduced after 2009 to increase the transition)?
- Can cultural barriers explain the reluctance of some groups of VET graduates to apply for higher education when they are unemployed (fear of being strangers in an academic world)? Could this be relieved through targeted introduction programmes?
- Do the unemployed VET graduates in some fields lack the relevant entrance qualifications for UASs? If so, could initiatives, like preparatory courses, help increase the permeability from VET to the UAS?