

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

6.2 VET and innovation: an underdeveloped role

In several interviews, we explored the perceived role of VET within the national innovation system. VET was primarily described in the interviews as a supplier of skilled labour, rather than as an actor directly contributing to innovation processes. Innovation was more often associated with universities, research institutions and UASs. According to the interviews, VET is not explicitly mentioned in the recently developed national innovation policy.

At the same time, interviewees provided examples of collaboration between VET providers and UASs, particularly in regions with strong industrial sectors. However, such cooperation appears to be locally initiated and driven, without structured support at national level. There is no dedicated funding instrument specifically aimed at strengthening VET's role in innovation.

Several respondents pointed to potential for deeper and more systematic collaboration between higher education research, UASs, VET and employers in innovative industries. Employers have signalled a need for easier and more coordinated access to education providers. Given institutional linkages between education and working life were described as relatively weak in some sectors, there is a risk that the potential for workplace-based innovation is not being fully utilised.

Our reflection is that VET's role within the broader innovation system remains somewhat unclear and under-institutionalised. There is potential to clarify and further strengthen VET's contribution to innovation and regional development.

The Netherlands: The role of Dutch VET institutes in innovation

As a point of comparison, the Dutch government realised that alongside fundamental research at research universities and applied research at UASs, there is a need for more practice-oriented research. The ministry of education therefore introduced *practorates* at VET colleges some 10 years ago. These *practorates* are responsible for practice-oriented research in collaboration with industry and other work organisations. They also drive innovation in VET and are structurally financed. On top of that they are eligible for additional research funding from the Dutch National Education Institute (Nationaal Kennisinstituut Onderwijs (NKO)), which finances all education research. The funding scheme is such that collaboration between research universities, UASs and VET is stimulated. While such models cannot simply be transposed directly into different contexts, they illustrate possible ways of strengthening VET's position within innovation ecosystems.