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EDUCATION OF THE PROFESSIONALS IN THE ECEC SECTOR IN FINLAND 2023:
Evaluation of current situation and development needs

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Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) conducted an evaluation of education in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector in 2022–2023. The evaluation was targeted at the education of ECEC professionals implemented by universities, universities of applied sciences, VET providers, and Snellman University College. In accordance with the Act on early childhood education and care (540/2018) the degree earned from each institute gives the eligibility to work in teaching, upbringing, care, and managerial tasks in ECEC. The titles for personnel in the field of ECEC are teacher of ECEC, social pedagogue of ECEC, childcarer of ECEC, childminder in family day-care, special education teacher of ECEC, head of early education centre, and early childhood educator offering Steiner pedagogical education in ECEC.

The evaluation focused on the following areas of evaluation: 1. Knowledge base and up-to-dateness of education leading to a qualification or degree, 2. Competence produced by education leading to a qualification or degree, 3. Flexible education pathways and competence produced by them, 4. Processes for the development of education leading to a qualification or degree.

The evaluation data was collected from VET providers (N = 60), universities of applied sciences (N = 20), universities (N = 7), Snellman University College, students of ECEC (N = 92) and ECEC actors in municipalities (N = 157). During the first phase of the evaluation, the data consisted of the curricula and their implementation plans as well as the national qualification requirements and their implementation plans. In the second phase, the evaluation data consisted of self-assessment surveys sent to VET providers, universities of applied sciences, universities, and Snellman University College. Additionally, notes made during the student workshops and a survey sent to workplace representatives in ECEC were included in the dataset.

Based on the results, education sector specific development recommendations were drawn up for VET providers, universities of applied sciences, universities, and Snellman University College. The recommendations are presented in the Chapter 12.

In addition to the recommendations specific to the education sectors, themes common to all levels of education and all qualifications and degrees were drawn up. The evaluation team proposes the following development recommendations concerning all the education programmes, qualifications and degrees:

Conclusions:

Both the content of the education and the practices for implementing it are at the heart of high-quality education in the ECEC sector. What is common to the educational sectors providing education in ECEC is the changed professional structure in ECEC and the need to clarify the competence profiles and the content of instruction of the qualifications and degrees. A multiprofessional approach has for a long time been considered a strength of Finnish ECEC, and it requires recognition of both the shared competence of all professionals and the differentiated competence of different professional groups.

Based on the evaluation, there is still some confusion about the multidisciplinary approach and the competence profiles of different professional groups, and this is partly visible in the overlapping contents of the education programmes. At the same time, the representatives of both the education and the workplaces have partly overlapping aspirations about the needs to develop the competence of different professional groups. This is partly because of the discourses used in the descriptions of competence. The desired competence areas are expressed at a very general level, often mentioning only the area of the competence. When developing the content of the education programmes, it should be ensured that the learning outcomes defined for the programmes will not become too extensive and that the overlapping of competence will not increase. It is therefore important for all the education programmes to develop their content to support the forming of a clear competence profile for each qualification or degree.

Recommendation:

1. VET providers, universities of applied sciences and universities should together continue to clarify the competence profiles of qualifications and degrees and the development of the content of teaching in the ECEC sector. The evaluation team proposes that the benefits of multiprofessional work are realised when the education programmes produce competence that includes both competence common to them and differentiated competence to an appropriate extent. It is important that all VET providers and higher education institutions continue, both together and within their own qualification or degree, to clarify what competence each qualification or degree produces in ECEC as a whole and in individual competence areas.

Conclusions:

Professional interaction is a central dimension in the work carried out in ECEC. Based on the evaluation data, practices for implementing the education have formed at all levels of education, in which interaction carried out as face-to-face interaction, feedback or guidance is not always sufficiently available. Distance learning has benefits related to the accessibility and flexibility of education. However, regardless of the form of implementation, all education should primarily support the achievement of the learning outcomes defined for the studies and the forming of the student's professional identity.

The vocational skills in ECEC are realised as practical competence but require the support of sufficient theoretical competence from all ECEC professionals. The knowledge and information related to vocational competence in ECEC also renew rapidly as a result of new research information and the active development carried out in the field of ECEC. All

education sectors have their own emphasis for workplace education and training as part of providing the education. In addition to workplace education and training, all the education programmes should include a sufficient amount of theoretical information to make it possible to implement the practice-related learning outcomes that have been defined for the education.

Recommendation:

2. The planning and implementation of the education in the ECEC sector should better take into account the goals and quality requirements set for the education. The evaluation team sees that the development of professional competence in ECEC requires sufficient classroom instruction, guidance, and feedback to students. It is necessary to be aware of the importance of classroom instruction and personal guidance in the situation where the number of students and the accessibility of the education programmes are justifiably increased. Parties responsible for decisions regarding education policy and the provision of education should ensure that all the education programmes include the theoretical knowledge essential from the point of view of the competence profile.

Conclusions:

Workplace education and training play an important role in the ECEC sector. Based on the evaluation, however, the current field of work in ECEC, which has reached a state of crisis in some places, is a challenging environment for the implementation of workplace education and training. The shortage of personnel challenges workplace education and training at all levels of education, resulting in problems with the quality and sufficiency of instruction at workplaces.

The situation in the world of work makes it more difficult for students to build their professional identity during workplace education and training, and these experiences play an important role in staying at work in the ECEC sector. Finding measures to improve the attraction and retention power of the sector and developing the working conditions are essential objectives to ensure the quality and attractiveness of education programmes in the ECEC sector. Problems in the availability of suitable workforce challenge the achievement of the objectives set for the education programmes. Students do not always have the opportunity to work in the role of a student during work placements and study units completed at workplaces and to receive high-quality instruction or feedback.

Recommendation:

3. Workplace education and training in ECEC should support the achievement of the learning outcomes defined for the qualification or degree and the development of students' professional identity. The education programmes and workplaces in the ECEC sector should together develop practices that safeguard the continuity of instruction for students and their right to work in the role of a student at workplaces. It is important for education providers, higher education institutions and workplaces to build a shared understanding of the objectives of workplace education and training. Education providers should contribute to ensuring adequate guidance and feedback to students during workplace education and training. The steering of education, the education programmes and workplaces should together continue to develop a high-quality work environment and, at the same time, a high-quality learning environment for future generations of professionals.

Conclusions:

The evaluation shows an increase in the wellbeing challenges faced by students of ECEC in VET and higher education. The increased needs of support were partly related to learning problems and partly to difficulties with coping. Students' wellbeing and progress in studies are challenged by the reconciliation of studies and other areas of life, such as work and studies, in particular. The evaluation team considers safeguarding students' wellbeing as key to the development of their professional competence. In order to achieve this goal, joint efforts by different actors are required. Safeguarding students' wellbeing requires measures from policymakers, education programmes and the parties funding the education programmes.

Recommendation:

4. Students' wellbeing and the support provided to them as well as students' ability to study should be ensured in VET and higher education. Sufficient and long-term core funding should be ensured at the level of the steering of education. VET providers, universities of applied sciences and universities should in turn ensure that core funding is directed to sufficiently strengthen the guidance of studies and the support students need in their learning at all levels of the organisation. Policy decisions should be made to secure the preconditions for students' coping financially as well as sufficient student health services and student welfare services.

Keywords: vocational education and training (VET), universities of applied sciences, evaluation, higher education, studies, Snellman University College, education in the ECEC sector, early childhood education and care (ECEC), universities