

Published by

Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC)

Title of publication

Partnering with working life – Evaluation of workplace education and training and working life cooperation in vocational education and training

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In 2021–2022, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre carried out an evaluation of the processes and practices related to working life orientation and cooperation in vocational education and training (VET). The evaluation produced information about the realisation, implementation methods, functionality and effectiveness of workplace education and training. Additionally, the evaluation produced information on the structures and forms of cooperation between VET providers and employers, their effectiveness and related development needs.

The evaluation data consisted of register data concerning workplace education and training and competence demonstrations; student and employer feedback in VET; questionnaires aimed at VET providers and personnel teaching VET qualification units; and interviews with employers and workplace instructors. The preliminary conclusions and development recommendations arising from the results of the evaluation were discussed with stakeholders in a development webinar before their final formulation.

According to the evaluation, nearly all VET providers have some cooperation forums and bodies with employers, which are seen as strengthening the working life orientation of VET. The forms of cooperation with and services offered to employers are also quite diverse, although there is a need to develop them to better meet the needs of employers. The most common forms of working life cooperation are various projects and initiatives, student visits to workplaces, employer visits to educational institutions and employer representatives serving as instructors at educational institutions. Some VET providers also have shared learning environments, machinery and equipment with employers.

According to the evaluation, the majority of VET providers have mapped local workplaces suitable for acquiring competence corresponding to national qualification requirements. Additionally, nearly all VET providers have a register or similar of workplaces suitable for workplace education and training, and the majority of VET providers also keep it updated. For some fields and qualifications,

it is challenging to find workplaces suitable for competence acquisition and demonstrations. These challenges are more prevalent in the context of initial vocational qualifications than that of further vocational qualifications and specialist vocational qualifications. The challenges are most prevalent in the humanities and the arts, and more specifically qualifications in the fields of media and visual expression, applied art and performance. The most common factors hindering the finding of workplaces suitable for workplace education and training were the simple lack or small number of workplaces, companies being small in size or one-person companies due to the nature of the field in question and local workplaces not corresponding to national qualification requirements.

The objectives, tasks and competence development monitoring of workplace education and training are not always collaboratively defined by the teacher, the student and the workplace instructor, which contributes to reducing the quality of workplace education and training. In most cases, VET providers verify in advance whether a student seeking to participate in workplace education and training has the necessary skills and competence for it. However, there is still a need for more discussion between VET providers and employers about what level of competence students should possess at the start of a workplace education and training period.

According to the evaluation, the tools that VET providers use to maintain communication with, guide and monitor the competence development of students during workplace education and training are varied, but quite traditional. The most common communication and guidance methods are phone calls, visits to the workplace, text messages or messaging applications and email. Digital tools are widely used, especially when the workplaces where the education and training take place are located further away. By contrast, virtual learning environments are still rarely used to provide guidance and monitor competence development during workplace education and training. Teachers generally maintain regular contact with students during workplace education and training, and workplace instructors are primarily satisfied with the support that educational institutions provide for guiding students and monitoring their competence development.

The organisation of competence demonstrations as part of workplace education and training works well, and students are in most cases satisfied with the implementation of competence demonstrations. Most workplace instructors feel that they have received sufficient training for assessing competence demonstrations and that the organisation of competence demonstrations in cooperation with educational institutions has primarily worked well. Ideally, competence demonstrations should be planned in collaboration with the teacher, the student and the workplace representative, but this does not always happen. Approximately half of VET providers always plan competence demonstrations collaboratively between the teacher, the student and the workplace representative. However, nearly one in ten students who responded to the VET student feedback questionnaire (Amispalaute) reported that they had not participated in the planning of their competence development. According to the evaluation, the level of cooperation between VET providers related to workplace education and training and especially the organisation of competence demonstrations is still relatively low.

Many VET providers employ a variety of alternative methods to develop the skills of workplace instructors, and the majority of VET providers provide workplace instructors with regular opportunities to develop their guidance and assessment skills. The most common methods

were training and orientation sessions carried out as contact and online teaching and workplace-specific orientations at the start of workplace education and training periods or in connection with teachers' guidance visits.

The majority of teaching and guidance personnel felt that working life cooperation develops their field-specific competence. Some VET providers organise work experience periods for teachers to develop their competence. The most common reasons for the lack of work experience periods for teachers and not participating in them were various resource-related reasons, such as lack of funding, personnel and time.

According to the evaluation, employers are still too unaware of the potential of apprenticeship agreements, which poses challenges for the realisation of apprenticeship training. Although VET providers have a variety of ways and methods to raise awareness of different forms of workplace education and training, employers are not sufficiently aware of e.g. students being able to convert a training agreement into an apprenticeship agreement and vice versa, the possibility of establishing apprenticeship agreements that are shorter than entire qualifications, the possibility of being granted financial compensation for education and training and, on the other hand, the obligation to provide guidance to the student.

According to the evaluation, the majority of VET providers monitor, evaluate and develop workplace education and training and working life cooperation on a regular basis. Workplace instructors are mostly satisfied with the cooperation with educational institutions. Furthermore, VET providers collect information on the competence needs and cooperation opportunities of employers on a regular basis. Instead, both workplace instructors and employers rate the ability of educational institutions to develop their operations based on the feedback they receive to be weaker. Development operations based on this collected information seem to be fairly small in scale, with operations seemingly relying on previously established practices, operating methods and relationships. Thus, from the perspective of employers, the capacity of VET providers to develop their operations based on received feedback requires further development.

The evaluation provided the following development recommendations:

- New methods should be developed to increase the number of workplaces suitable for workplace education and training.
- The expectations and roles of educational institutions and employers regarding competence development should be clarified.
- Educational institutions and workplaces should agree on the practices and responsibilities related to guidance and competence development monitoring together.
- The collaborative planning of competence demonstrations by teachers, students and workplace instructors should be strengthened.
- Employers' awareness of training agreements and especially apprenticeship training should be further increased.
- VET providers should continue their efforts to develop the guidance and assessment skills of workplace instructors and offer more opportunities for updating and developing these skills.

- VET providers should enable and encourage teachers to continuously develop their competence. It is especially important to ensure the field-specific competence of teachers.
- VET providers should continue to develop the provision of services and training stemming from the needs of working life. Cooperation between VET providers in the provision of services and training to employers should also be increased and harmonised.
- The monitoring, evaluation and development of workplace education and training and working life cooperation should continue, and the role of educational institutions' personnel in these efforts should be clarified. In particular, other forms of cooperation besides workplace education and training should be developed to better meet the needs of working life, and the feedback received about them should be better utilised.

Keywords: vocational education and training, working life orientation, working life cooperation, workplace education and training, workplace learning, training agreement, apprenticeship agreement, guidance, competence demonstrations, evaluation