



Nord-VET – The future of VET in the Nordic Countries

Recent Finnish VET Reforms and Innovations: Tackling The Current Challenges

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The purpose of the Nordic research project, Nord-VET, is to generate new knowledge on the strengths and weaknesses of the different models of vocational education and training (VET) at upper secondary level in the four Nordic countries. This research is expected to strengthen the knowledge base required for developing VET for the future.

The main purpose of this project is to shed light on the different Nordic ways of handling the key dilemma of providing double access to the labour market and to higher education in vocational education. More specifically it seeks to determine how the different ways of handling this dilemma have an impact on social equality, inclusion and the esteem of vocational education.

The project is publishing three sets of country studies on Finland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The first set of reports is on the historical emergence of vocational education (VET) in the four countries. The second set of reports is on the current challenges for VET in the four Nordic countries. This is the Danish report. The third report to be published February 2015 is on innovations in VET.

For more information visit the homepage: www.nord-vet.dk

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Introduction

The aim of this report is to discuss and analyse the way in which the Finnish system of initial vocational education and training (VET) has been developed to respond to the four challenges investigated in the project: the Future of Vocational Education – Learning from the Nordic Countries (Nord-VET)¹. These four challenges are 1) access from VET to work-based learning and the labour market, 2) progression from VET to higher education, 3) to improve the standing of VET among young people and in the labour market and 4) how VET has improved social inclusion and combatted student drop-out. The emphasis of this report is on developments relating to these four challenges since the 1990s, but reference to earlier developments and longer time-spans is made when necessary.

The report – *Recent Finnish VET Reforms and Innovations: Tackling the Current Challenges* – is the third country report prepared as part of the Nord-VET project. The previous two country reports are available on the project’s web-page. The first explores the historical emergence of vocational education and training in each of the project’s partner countries (Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Norway) (Reports 1a). The second investigates the current state of challenges for VET in each country in the mid-2010s (Reports 1b). Both of these reports provide valuable background information for this third country report (Report 1c). Together, they enable further comparisons of the Nordic VET systems.

The focus of this third country report is on innovations developed within the national vocational education systems to meet the four challenges presented above. In what follows, the ability of the Finnish model of VET to meet these four challenges is discussed and analysed. The challenges are studied in the same order presented above. Developments relating to access to work-based learning and progression from VET to higher education are investigated in the same section because they have been constructed in the same or parallel reforms. The report explores the manner in which the four dilemmas have been managed through policy reforms and the kinds of institutional adjustments and innovations made since the mid-1990s (and even earlier). Furthermore, it will assess whether the reforms have produced unintended consequences while trying to address the challenges.

1 The website of the research project “Nord-VET” is available at <http://nord-vet.dk/>. The project Nord-VET is funded by NordForsk in 2013-16.

1. Innovations in Finnish VET: Improving access to work-based learning and the labour market and enhancing progression from VET to higher education

The origins of expanding the school-based VET in the reforms of the 1980s

In Finland, the dominant form of organising initial vocational education and training is the school-based vocational education and training. The enhancement of the school-based model of VET in Finland dates back to educational policy discussions in the 1960s. At the same time, apprenticeship training has been developed mainly as a form of adult education (see Stenström & Virolainen, 2014).

In 1963, the Finnish parliament suggested that the Finnish government begin preparations for organising a unified upper secondary education (Salminen, 1999). The reasons for reorganising upper secondary education were to improve the control of the number of study places and to provide a study place for every compulsory school leaver either in general upper secondary education or in vocational upper secondary education. In addition, the aim of the upper secondary school reform was to improve the organisation of education both structurally and content-wise (Salminen, 1999).

The Finnish government nominated several consecutive committees to prepare the reform, including ‘Koulutusrakennekomitea’ [Committee for the Structural Reform of Education] and ‘vuoden 1971 koulutuskomitea’ [the 1971 Committee for Education]. The direction for the upper secondary school reform was confirmed by the government in 1974, and it was decided that this reform would focus on reforming the curricula of vocational upper secondary education. Accordingly, general upper secondary education was to be developed separately (Salminen, 1999). The reform was aimed at educational equality, offering study places to every compulsory school leaver in each age cohort, the rationalisation of education, a decrease in consecutive qualifications taken by individuals and the removal of dead ends in the educational structure (Salminen, 1999). The compulsory school reform, which established a unified comprehensive education for the whole population, was implemented alongside the planning of the upper secondary reform which began in 1972 (Salminen, 1999).

The work of the ‘vuoden 1971 koulutuskomitea’ [the 1971 Committee for Education] was decisive in the sense that it had proposed that an entire generation complete 11 years of general education whereafter all students would start on the same level of education and continue towards occupation-specific programmes (Salminen, 1999). The compulsory school reform implemented in 1972–1977 defined that the common general education, which was aimed at the entire population, was to take place in the form of a nine-year-long comprehensive education (Rinne, 2013). The idea of a common, more general education component in the upper secondary education curricula, which was presented by the 1971 Committee for Education, was materialised in the reformed vocational education curriculum (Ekola, 1991). Finally, the law pertaining to the up-

per secondary education reform came into effect in 1978, and the reform was implemented in 1982–1988 (Salminen, 1999; Numminen, 2000).

The general education component introduced in the vocational upper secondary and post-secondary education curriculum was meant to orient students towards trades and corresponding occupations (Ekola, 1991). The aim was that the general education component would develop general vocational abilities, technological competences, communication skills and environmental protection skills and would combine an all-round education with occupational skills for a more general vocational education. While this was seen as a good aim, its implementation was problematic. The curriculum was not built according to the initial aims of the reform and did not serve its original purpose. The problems in its implementation were seen to result from a lack of analysis regarding lines of trade and corresponding occupations (Ekola, 1991). The curriculum aims were commonly materialised by adding general education subjects to the curriculum. As a result, the implementation of the new curriculum did not succeed. The general subjects were not satisfactorily combined with vocational content, and students found the new curriculum demotivating (Ekola, 1991). Furthermore, the dominance of old forms of vocational education prevailed. Typically, task-specific education started from day one of the education curriculum (Ekola, 1991). Thus, dropping out during the general education component was soon found to be a problem.

When the reform of vocational upper secondary education started in the 1980s, it was estimated that there were more than 650 vocational education programmes (Väärälä, 1995; Salminen, 1999). In the reform, vocational curricula were unified into 25 basic programmes, followed by about 250 parallel upper secondary and post-secondary specialisation lines (Numminen, 2000). Thirty of them were left without a general education component (Väärälä, 1995). The upper secondary and post-secondary specialisation lines were organised hierarchically so that upper secondary programmes would lead to blue-collar tasks, and post-secondary programmes were expected to lead to white-collar, supervisory and planning tasks (Numminen, 2000). Both programmes started with the common general education component.

In addition to reforming the curriculum content of vocational education to include more general orientation and general subjects, the vocational upper secondary reform changed the role of vocational school-based education in the education system (Numminen, 2000). It initiated a route to higher education through the post-secondary vocational programmes. The expanded general education content in the curriculum created a basis for further, higher education. Moreover, quantitative planning of the number of study places was enhanced (Numminen, 2000). Notwithstanding, the first modern plans for the demand for labour and the related demand for education had been presented at the end of the 1960s (Ahola, Kivinen, & Rinne, 1991).

The vocational upper secondary education reform of 1982–1988 can be interpreted as having initiated a period of educational policy whereby the general education component of vocational education was enhanced in order to promote participation in higher and further education. In the 1980s, the initial vocational education programmes lasted 2–3 years. In the 1990s, the structure of vocational education was further reformed, and these reforms later created the basis for the trend whereby the enhancement of work-based learning would take place, in particular, since the 2000s.

The 1990s' reforms enhanced work-based learning and access to higher education

The aims of the structural reform introduced in the vocational education system in the 1990s were:

- to raise the level of education by improving some contents and eliminating others and by creating a new higher education route (ammattikorkeakoulut, i.e. officially polytechnics, translated to universities of applied sciences [in short UAS], in the 2000s)
- to develop the structure of qualifications so that instead of earlier lines of education, there would be seven fields of education further divided into 77 upper secondary qualifications and 80 post-secondary education qualifications
- the establishment of a consecutive educational structure which allowed accreditation for prior learning and decreased overlapping education
- to broaden the educational content with the aim of a wide general vocational education and multi-vocational approach
- the modularisation of the curriculum, which enabled the introduction of compulsory and optional modules
- the enhancement of the number of free-choice courses in order to enhance individual choice
- the development of a multi-field approach which enables combinations of educational programmes and forms of education
- enhancement of the flexibility of the educational structure to support flexible progress, combination of studies and change
- promotion of the linkages between educational institutions and the world of work in order to develop internships, end-of programme practices and local innovative projects
- the renewal of teaching cultures to promote more varied teaching and learning methods
- the internationalisation of education in order to respond to change of culture and the labour market (Väärälä, 1995, pp. 129–130).

In this reform, the aim of promoting linkages between educational institutions and the world of work made explicit the demand to enhance forms of work-based learning in vocational education in a new way. It reflected the need to find new pedagogical approaches as the earlier curriculum reform had not been successful. Accordingly, work-based learning was developed together with end-of programme practices and local innovative study programmes (Leino-Kilpi & Räisänen, 1995).

The number of general upper secondary students who had taken matriculation examinations and were looking for higher and further education opportunities was defined as a problem in the late 1980s. The problem was discussed as 'ylioppilassuma' [the dilemma of matriculated students] (Jalkanen, 1997; Salminen, 1999; Numminen, 2000; Ahola, 2010). The lack of further and higher education opportunities created a dilemma whereby matriculated general upper secondary students spent years looking for satisfactory higher or further education opportunities. As a result, educational careers were prolonged, and the transition to the labour-market was postponed.

The preparation of the subsequent curriculum reform of upper secondary vocational education started in 1993, and according to the government's decision, it had to be implemented in vocational upper secondary schools from 1995 and in post-secondary schools from 1996 (Väärälä, 1995; Stenström, 1997). As a result of the reform, the decision-making power regarding the contents

of education was moved to educational providers. The length of time spent in education, the accreditation of prior learning, national aims as well as the core structure were to be decided at the national level, but the responsibility for planning curriculum contents became a matter for the local level and was placed in the hands of educational providers (Väärälä, 1995). The reform also meant a reduction in the centralised regulation of education in order to make room for modules that educational institutions could plan and implement to meet local needs (Stenström, 1997).

Changes to the eligibility to higher education, which were introduced in the curriculum reform of 1995, enhanced the further education opportunities for those who had chosen the vocational track. Those who had completed the two-year (80 study credits) qualification gained eligibility to studies in the same educational fields in the polytechnics (Stenström, 1997). In the same vein, those who had completed a three-year qualification (120 study credits) were awarded general eligibility to study in polytechnics in any field in which they could find a study place (Stenström, 1997).

Paralleling the VET curriculum reforms in the 1990s, the Finnish Ministry of Education ran a youth education experiment and a polytechnics experiment (Numminen, Lampinen, Mykkänen, & Blom, 1999). The former was established to experiment different ways of combining general and vocational upper secondary education to enhance higher education abilities and multi-vocational competences. It allowed education providers of general upper secondary education and vocational education to offer students the possibility of combining studies from both institutions in the 16 participating regions. The possibility of combining studies from several upper secondary institutions was based on the modularisation of the curriculum. It allowed the coordination of the curriculum and timetables between institutions and gave students a chance to alternate between the institutions. Young people used the 30–40% flexibility given to them in terms of the ordinary curriculum in order to make individual choices. Typically, these choices were made in order to gain eligibility to higher education, or to add some studies which were not provided by their own institutions, or students wanted to broaden their professional competences with studies from other vocational programmes or to pursue hobby-related studies (Virolainen & Valkonen, 1999). The last age cohort, which entered upper secondary education under the youth education experiment in the respective regions, started in 2001 (Laki nuorisooasteen koulutuksen ja ammattikorkeakoulujen kokeiluista annetun lain kumoamisesta annetun lain 3 §:n muuttamisesta 519/2000).

On the context of the youth education experiment, professional higher education was developed through the polytechnics experiment (Numminen et al., 1999). The former vocational education colleges which provided post-secondary VET qualifications developed their higher level curriculum, their staff were further educated and their internationalisation was enhanced. Polytechnics were established as a permanent form of higher professional education by 2000, and some of them started to use the English translation universities of applied sciences (UAS) soon thereafter even though the rectors of traditional science universities resisted this as late as 2006.

The curricula of initial school-based VET were further reformed in 1998–2001, and the post-secondary level VET was gradually abolished and displaced by polytechnics (Numminen, 2000; Stenström & Virolainen, 2014). Furthermore, the qualification structure of VET qualifications was developed. The number of VET qualifications was decreased to around 70, and basic education programmes were extended to three years. Still, even though the number of specific qualifications was decreased, each qualification could have several specifications. For example,

a qualification in vehicle technology had specifications such as: vehicle mechanic, vehicle body repairer, vehicle painter, car salesperson and parts salesperson (National Board of Education, 2000). Likewise, within the textiles and clothing qualification, it was possible to specialise in dress-making, fur-dressing, tailoring or millinery. This curriculum reform also included the strong enhancement of work-based learning in the VET curriculum because all programmes incorporated an on-the-job training period (Virtanen, 2013). It was expected to last at least six months (equal to at least 20 study credits). In addition, skills demonstrations were adopted as a new form of assessment (Numminen, 2000; Stenström, Laine, & Kurvonen, 2006; Stenström, 2009). Since 2005, the number of vocational qualifications was further reduced to 52. Still, each qualification has had a varying number of specifications, reflecting the occupational structures of the line of trade (National Board of Education, 2015a).

In the context of the reforms of the initial VET and the youth and polytechnic experiments, a new system of competence-based qualifications was designed for adults in the 1990s (National Board of Education, 2004). The competence-based qualifications system was established in 1994 and allowed the demonstration of vocational qualifications, further vocational qualifications and specialist vocational qualifications. Participants of competence tests were not required to participate in formal education before taking the test. The idea was (then and still is) that you can have your skills qualified regardless of where you have learnt them. In practice, most qualifications were taken after participation in training, and competence tests were arranged in connection with this training (National Board of Education, 2004).

The initial vocational curricula were further renewed in the late 2000s. These reforms were more content-oriented since the reforms in the beginning of the 2000s had already introduced three-year vocational qualifications, which included work-based learning periods and skills demonstrations in all fields of production. These renewed VET qualifications also allowed access to the labour market and higher education (to traditional science universities as well as universities of applied sciences).

The latest curriculum reform is slated for implementation in August 2015. It further redefines the initial VET curriculum towards the competence-based approach. In connection with the curriculum reform of 2015, it has been claimed that the working life orientation and competence-based approach has been the starting point of the Finnish VET since the 1990s and that the later developments have only been fine-tuning and developing this approach (Kärki, 2014). The curriculum reform of 1994–1996 had already begun the modularisation of curriculum. The aim then was already to constitute modules from units of action typical to each trade. It was expected that a modular curriculum would help cross the boundaries of individual subjects while factual material would be used and components of studies would be organised as projects (Leino-Kilpi & Räisänen, 1995; Väärälä, 1995).

In comparison with the initial vocational education reforms in the 1990s and 2000s, the curriculum reform of 2015 continues to enhance the work-based learning approach in particular. The enhancement of general subjects and students' abilities in them in order to promote progress towards higher education are not exactly agenda items. As indicated above, the new curriculum, which shall be implemented on 01 August 2015, aims to enhance the competence-based approach. In the new VET curricula, the earlier 120 study credits (*opintoviikot*, in Finnish) of

a three-year qualification have been transformed to 180 competence points (*osaamis pisteet*, in Finnish). Otherwise the qualifications structure remains, in principle, mostly the same, with its 52 vocational qualifications. The broadest change in the 2015 curriculum reform has to do with the more competence-based definition of curriculum which dissolves direct linkages between progress in studies and time spent on studies (National Board of Education, 2015b). Since progress of studies is not followed according to study weeks, but according to competence points, it is claimed that the new curriculum will increase individuality and flexibility even though the comparison of the old and new curriculum contents (study credits vs. competence points) seems to suggest that flexibility has been reduced (cf. Stenström & Virolainen, 2014).

The Finnish path of VET: Enhancing competence-based qualifications

The curriculum reform of 2015 reflects the need to harmonise the Finnish VET with the European Qualification Framework. By defining the initial VET curricula in terms of the competence-based approach and competence points, the national qualification framework seems to continue to follow the prevailing national model. The dominant VET model is school-based even though the curriculum is equivalent to competence-based qualifications targeting adults and is thus somewhat closer to the outcomes-based approach. The competence points can be completed through skills demonstrations. As such, the national curriculum framework is still committed to equal opportunities and providing eligibility to higher education.

The Finnish model of school-based VET thus differs from more outcomes-based approaches in Europe, for example, that in the United Kingdom. The role of outcomes-based approaches has been enhanced in European discussions ever since the European Commission's 2009 recommendation to its partner countries to organise a transport system for study credits (Bjørnåvold & Pevec Grm, 2013; Kärki, 2014). The European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) is expected to facilitate the recognition of prior learning and existing competences. However, discussions about the outcomes-based approach begun in the past decades (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training [CEDEFOP], 2008). Dating back to the 1980s, the demands for the transparency of qualifications and the validation of non-formal and informal learning emerged together with greater internationalisation and expected mobility of the labour force. The outcomes-based approach was also expected to improve the employability of the young and unemployed (CEDEFOP, 2008).

The definition of qualifications in terms of outcomes has been seen as a shift of power away from education providers towards wider groups of interest, such as government, employers and learners (Young & Allais, 2009). The effect that the adoption of an outcomes-based approach has is bound to vary and depends on former VET traditions. In countries where longevity of curriculum traditions exists and where VET already has established institutions and related communities of practice (such as VET teachers, vocational and professional associations and field-specific education and training committees) defining curriculum aims, the effect of an outcomes-based definition of curriculum aims can be moderated. These groups and networks of expertise have engaged in previous analysis of the knowledge base demanded for successful action in trades.

Weak and non-existent VET institutions and systems have been seen as more vulnerable to

dis-connections between learning outcomes and learning programmes (Young & Allais, 2009). Accordingly, in extreme cases, weak or emergent VET institutions would limit their activities to certifying learning outcomes instead of participating in analyses of competence needs in the labour market, curriculum construction and pedagogical designs for the adoption of curriculum contents. In practice, in countries where communities of practice, such as qualified VET teachers, or educated government administrations do not exist (e.g. countries, where accredited VET provision does not exist), there is no group of professionals who would be particularly competent in curriculum planning and pedagogical design (see Evans, Guile, Harris, & Allan, 2010; Evans, Guile, & Harris, 2011). In such cases, defining an outcomes-based curriculum is a starting point for the analysis of the skills needed in the trades. In countries where vocational education traditions exist, the adoption of an outcomes-based curriculum is bound to bear greater relation to enhancing linkages between working life and education providers as well as the updating of curriculum aims.

Despite the existence of earlier curriculum traditions in many European countries, the adoption of outcomes-based curricula has been suspected of resulting in the dis-embedding of the vocational curriculum from vocational content (Young & Allais, 2009). On one hand, this could take place by displacing the specialised knowledge content and requirements related to specific knowledge fields with generic criteria (in terms of competence or capability). On the other hand, if there is too much emphasis on specificity, the demanded outcomes could be narrowed and procedures for their assessment trivialised to ticking boxes in lists of criteria. In sum, the concept of ‘learning outcome’ has been found too general for defining what the curriculum is about. In practice, it has been interpreted and used in many different ways in European countries. It has also been used only as a feature in the design of qualifications frameworks and not as its driving mechanism (Young & Allais, 2009). For instance, in the British context, competency-oriented VET and the allied learning outcomes approach have been critiqued for instrumentalism, lack of flexibility and anti-educationalism (e.g. Avis, 2012; Clegg & Ashworth, 2004; Raggatt & Williams, 1999; Wolf, 1995, 2011).

Summary

In Finland, the development of the school-based form of VET as the dominant form of initial vocational education training dates back to the decisions made in educational policy in the 1980s. During those times, the need to expand the delivery of upper secondary and post-secondary education became apparent, and later, successive reforms gave a basis to VET’s current, improved status. Two long-term developments have been of utmost importance in this respect. First, the development of the general education component within VET, including the continuous development of its pedagogy, has created the basis for participation in higher and further education as well as for life-long learning. Second, the development of higher and further education opportunities resulting from VET and the removal of dead-ends in the educational system have increased VET’s reputation. In Finland, participation in the initial VET has been on the increase since the beginning of the 2000s (see also Stenström & Virolainen, 2014, p. 48; Virolainen & Stenström, 2014). In 2012, 42% of compulsory school leavers chose VET. Twenty years earlier, only 32%

of compulsory school leavers continued immediately to the initial VET (Statistics Finland, 1994, taken from Lasonen & Stenström, 1995).

The reforms of the 1970s–2010s are described decade by decade in Table 1 and focus particularly on the changes in the qualification structure, curriculum contents and eligibility to higher education. The chain of successive reforms shows how the Finnish initial VET has been developed in relation to compulsory education and higher education since the 1970s. In particular, the role of the general education component and the kind of general education delivered at the upper secondary level, and demanded as a basis for higher and further education, have been changing. In the reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, the general education component of the initial VET curriculum was first enhanced, and it later enabled eligibility to progress to higher education when applied science universities were established. Since the mid-1990s, the initial VET curriculum has been extended to a three-year-long qualification, and work-based learning contents as well as skills demonstrations have been developed as part of it (Stenström, Laine, & Kurvonen, 2006; Virtanen, 2013). The latest curriculum reform, which adopts a more competence-based approach, continues to enhance the linkages with the world of work.

The strength and success of school-based vocational education in comparison to general upper secondary education have been dependent on its higher and further education opportunities. The wide range of opportunities to continue studies after the initial VET differentiates the Finnish VET from that of many of its European counterparts (see e.g. Spöttl, 2013). While the Swedish VET is organised in a unified model, which includes general upper secondary studies, and allows progress to higher education, the situation is more complicated for apprentices in Denmark and Norway (see Jørgensen, 2014; Olsen, Høst, & Hagen Tønder, 2014). In Finland, applied science universities have provided a route to higher professional education at the bachelor's level since the 1990s. Together with this track, there have also been other further and higher education opportunities. Those with three years' work experience after the bachelor's degree from a UAS can continue to the master's level in a UAS (*ylemmät ammattikorkeakoulut*). Moreover, the route to traditional science universities has been made accessible to VET (depending on the *numerus clausus*). The share of those with vocational upper secondary certificates looking for a study place in a UAS was 27% among all UAS applicants in 2008–2009 (Kumpulainen, 2012). In 2004–2005, there were 21,966 applicants with a VET background. Among them, 44.5% received a study place, and 41.3% eventually started their UAS studies (Kumpulainen, 2008). In 2010–2011, there were 32,963 VET applicants. Among them, 35% received a study place, and 33% started their UAS studies (Kumpulainen, 2012). In traditional science universities, the participation of students with a VET background is remarkably lower. In 2004–2005, about two percent of students in traditional science universities had VET as their only former education (Kumpulainen, 2008).

In the context of higher education opportunities, further and specialist vocational education has been available as competence-based qualifications since the 1990s. Apprenticeship training has remained mainly as a route for adult vocational education (Stenström & Virolainen, 2014).

In the 1990s, the expanded provision of education led to concerns about an 'academic drift' taking place in vocational education at the European level (Green, Wolf, & Leney, 1999). The concerns were heightened because the contents of vocational upper secondary education were generalised to enable the skills and competences needed for successful progress to higher educa-

tion. As we can see from the reforms described above, in Finland, the ‘academic drift’ has been counterbalanced by enhancing work-based learning in order to increase employability.

In Finland, the latest VET curriculum reform in 2015 and the reorganisation of vocational and general components in the curriculum on the basis of the principles of the competence-based approach raises concerns about the development of VET students’ academic skills and preparedness to continue to higher education. Accordingly, the outcome of the competence-based curriculum reform of 2015 and its long-term effects remain to be seen. Naturally, they are dependent on higher education opportunities and corresponding entrance requirements. While the Finnish network of upper secondary education providers is also undergoing a restructuring, the outcomes of these changes (see Stenström & Virolainen, 2014) will demand a holistic system-level evaluation within five years. Not only are the content and aims of initial vocational education in flux, so too is the provision of upper secondary education, albeit more generally.

Table 1. The Development of the Finnish School-based Initial VET Curricula (for 16–19 Year Olds) in Relation to Higher Education Since the 1970s

	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
Qualification structure: number of specifications	650	250 qualifications; 25 basic programmes	-beginning of 1990s: 170 -late 1990s: 77 upper secondary and 80 post-secondary VET qualifications	52 qualifications with over 110 specifications	52 qualifications + reformed specifications
Vocational further and higher education opportunities after VET and qualification structure	In principle, no access to higher education since higher education in traditional science universities and vocational colleges was limited to general upper secondary school graduates	Parallel structure of 2-year upper secondary VET qualifications and 3-year post-secondary VET qualifications	Consecutive structure of 2-year upper secondary qualifications and 3-year post-secondary qualifications created; 3-year post-secondary qualifications offered by vocational colleges were replaced by universities of applied sciences	Universities of applied sciences established as permanent HE sector; expansion of second-cycle polytechnic degrees started (polytechnic master's degrees)	In addition to universities of applied sciences bachelor's degrees, polytechnic master's degrees provide an option for professional HE (eligibility for these is given by a relevant first-cycle degree with at least 3 years of relevant work or artistic experience)
Eligibility to higher education	No eligibility	Eligibility through post-secondary education	Expansion of eligibility to higher education through development of VET curriculum – all VET qualifications were extended to three-year qualifications	Three-year VET gives eligibility to UAS and traditional universities (based on numerus clausus)	Formal eligibility to all higher education with VET certificates (based on numerus clausus)
Major changes in curriculum	Training for occupational tasks from the very beginning of VET	Common general subject component introduced in upper secondary and post-secondary VET programmes	Modularisation of curriculum; flexibility and individual choice; development of internships in post-secondary VET. Polytechnics replace post-secondary VET and their curriculum is developed to a higher level	All qualifications extended to last three years (120 study credits) and on-the-job learning and skills demonstrations adopted in curriculum	Competence-based approach adopted as a principle of the curriculum. A shift from study credits to competence points

2. Innovations in Finnish VET: Improving the prestige of VET among young people and in the labour market

In Finland, the systemic changes introduced in the school-based VET during the last few decades have improved its status. Participation in VET and employment with VET qualifications have increased (see Figures 1 and 2). These systemic changes which have improved the initial VET's status are, in particular, reforms of curriculum and qualification structure as well as those relating to eligibility to higher education (discussed in detail in the previous section). When the year 1992 is taken as a starting point for comparison, the change in participation in VET is even more dramatic than is pictured in Figure 1 on the years 2000–2012. During those year, 32% of compulsory school leavers continued immediately to VET whereas the transition to VET increased to 41.5% by 2012 (Statistics Finland, 1994, cited by Lasonen & Stenström, 1995; Statistics Finland, 2014a).

In addition to these systemic changes, there are also other meaningful factors which have contributed to increased participation in VET in comparison to general upper secondary education. These additional factors, which have also positively affected the prestige of the Finnish VET, include skills competitions (Ruohotie, Nokelainen, & Korpelainen, 2008) and the internationalisation of VET (Korkala, 2012). National skills competitions have often been used for guidance counselling because they offer a glimpse into what is going on in VET studies. They show, in a down-to-earth manner, that the question in VET is about learning, training and winning. Likewise, internationalisation has not only improved the image of VET, it also enables opportunities to learn how people with similar educational backgrounds and vocational interests work in other countries: what kind of education they have, and what kind of career opportunities are available abroad. In 2010, the number of students who had participated in an international exchange for at least two weeks was about six percent of the number of VET entrants (Korkala, 2012).

The increased participation in the Finnish VET reflects the changed transition patterns within the education system and the wider opportunities for post-compulsory education. VET students' employability and transition to the labour market give yet another perspective about the expansion of education. Figure 2 shows how the employability of VET students has developed since 2005. Further statistics by Statistics Finland (2014c) show that VET graduates employment improved since 1998 until 2007, when the latest recession started. In addition, the Figure 2 shows how the expansion of higher education, typical to all Western European countries, has sustained the gap between the employability of VET students and higher education graduates. In Finland, finding employment with a vocational education background is significantly more difficult than finding employment with higher education certificates (Figure 2). Also, in Finland, the situation of those with an initial VET education background was slightly worse than in Denmark, Norway and Sweden in 2010 (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency [EACEA P9], 2012, p. 178; Virolainen & Stenström 2014). The differences in employment reflect the intensive expansion of higher education in Finland compared to other Nordic countries. In Finland, 19% of 20–39-year olds attended higher education institutions in 2012 while the rate was 15–17% in other Nordic countries. While the difference between Finland and other Nordic countries in HE at-

Figure 1. Direct transition to upper secondary education by completers of the 9th grade of comprehensive school in 2000–2012 in Finland (Statistics Finland, 2009, 2014a).

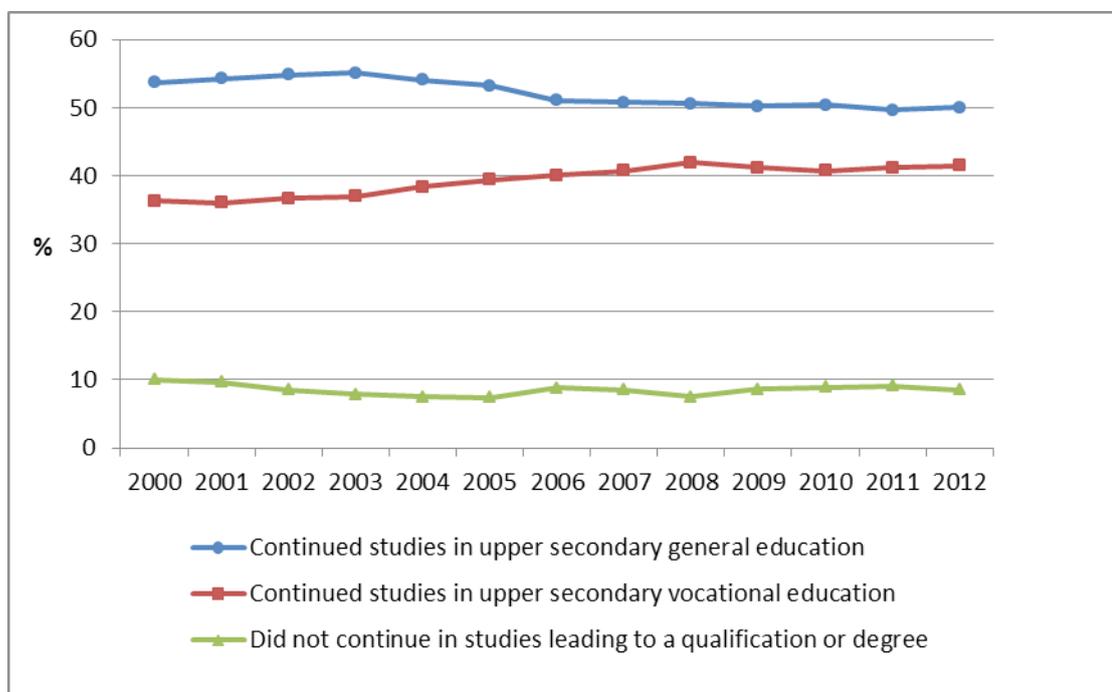
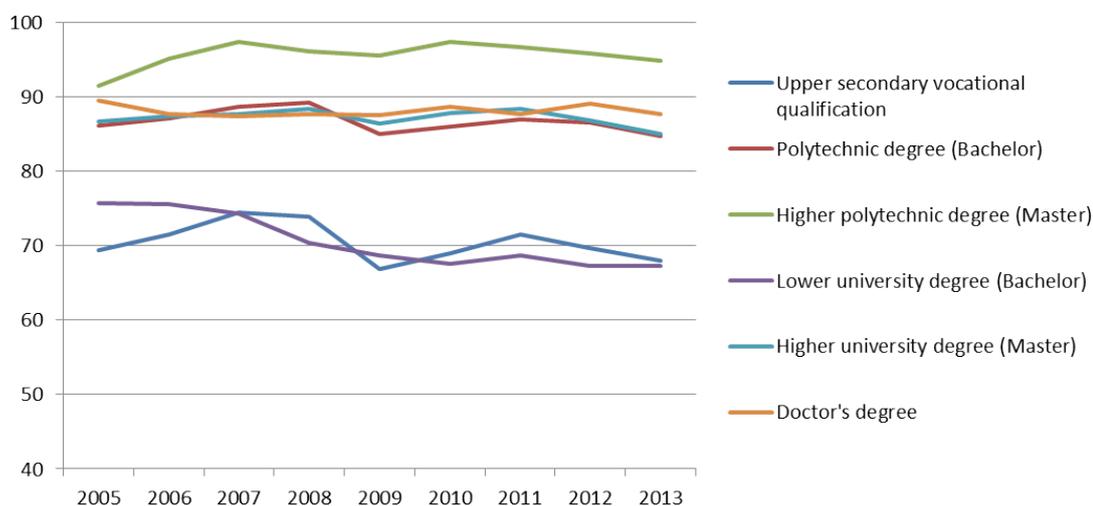


Figure 2. Employment of graduates one year after graduation 2005–2013 (%) (adopted from Statistics Finland, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014d, 2015).



tendance has been decreasing, there has been a long-term difference since the 1990s (Haagensen, 2014, p. 73). At the same time, since the beginning of the 1990s, the level of unemployment has been relatively high in Finland compared to other Nordic countries. It only decreased to the same level of Sweden's around 2008 (Haagensen, 2014, p. 84). In the Finnish education system, some tensions between employability with VET certificates and HE certificates have been solved by offering higher and further education opportunities and promoting life-long learning. Accordingly,

the Finnish education policy has been actively adjusting its strategy towards a service-oriented, knowledge-intensive economy. In Finnish society, the expanded provision of higher education and the related increase of research inputs have been seen as a vehicle towards the knowledge society in the 2000s (Schienstock & Hämäläinen, 2001). People have used these opportunities in various individual ways (see Stenström, Virolainen, Vuorinen-Lampila, & Valkonen, 2012). At the same time, the polarisation of skills needs as well as the changes in field-specific labour demands has created uneven skills shortages and an over-supply of qualifications in some fields (see Zukersteinova & Wilson, 2009). In order to respond to these mismatches, there is a need for adult education. In Finland, the level of participation in adult education has been relatively high, however, parts of the adult population suffer from shortages in basic skills (Malin, Sulkunen, & Laine, 2013). In relation to high levels of participation in higher and further education, there has been some public discussion on the inflation of qualifications; however, from an individual perspective, participation in education serves as a means to a better and more secure career and wider employment opportunities. One crucial question with respect to developing VET seems to be how to support participation in further education for those adults whose basic skills are weak and earlier education level low.

3. VET Innovations: Improving social inclusion and combating student drop-out

In principle, Finland shares the same welfare regime – the universalistic regime – as other Nordic countries, but there are also national differences in transition systems. The universalistic welfare regime is an outcome of Nordic nation states' construction of the welfare state. It is characteristic to the universalistic regime that education and training pathways are planned in an inclusive manner and that they are flexible to individual choices. Under this regime transition policies focus on the activation and education of the youth (Walther, 2009). The emphasis on individual choice in the transition policies of universalistic regimes differs from other regimes, which underline employment or have lower standards of training (Walther, 2009). While the Nordic countries share a universalistic regime as the robust framework for their transition policies, their transition systems also have differing characteristics. These differences include the tools by which the young are guided or obliged into education. Since 1996, in Finland, these tools include that youth under 24 years are obliged to participate in education or an apprenticeship training programme. They were not to receive unemployment benefits if they did not have vocational qualifications (Aho & Vehviläinen, 1997). Furthermore, since 2013, the Finnish Youth Guarantee has been offering everyone under the age of 25, as well as those who have recently graduated and are under 30 years, a job, on-the-job training, a study place or rehabilitation (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2013; Ministry of Employment and the Economy, 2012).

These policies have been seen as contributing to increases in the cancellation of studies, but follow-up research has not presented unambiguous support for such claims. There has been no significant difference in comparisons between cancellations by youth under the inclusive norms and those by voluntary entrants to education (Aho, Pitkänen, & Vanttaja, 2012). Half of the surveyed youth who participated in VET as a result of the normative, obligatory application system were also positive about the norm (Aho et al., 2012). Unfortunately, the number of respondents in this survey was quite low (n=92). Furthermore, the norm was seen as negative by young people who were very unclear about their study plans and by those who were determined to go to some specific place. These young people considered a gap year as a better option. Thus, the inflexibility and lack of individual adjustments was criticised by the youth in question. Some young people who were obliged to study in a field which did not interest them found it demotivating. They considered their own reasons for participation purely instrumental. They only participated for the sake of the economic benefits and criticised especially the guidance counselling offered to them in the last years of compulsory education (Aho et al., 2012). Also, in efforts to develop the youth guarantee, guidance has been found crucial (Mäkelä & Haukioja, 2014). On the whole, a paradox created by the increased freedom of choice and options has been the increased demand for guidance counselling.

Typically, the level of study cancellations has been somewhat higher in VET than in other sectors of education. In 2002–2003, around 11% of VET students cancelled their studies, and by 2011–2012, the level had decreased to nine percent (Statistics Finland, 2014b). The drop-out rate was lower in other sectors of education, and particularly in general upper secondary schools where less than four percent of students cancelled their studies (Statistics Finland, 2014b). The re-

duction in the drop-out rate, including in VET, is the result of several factors: more active policies of inclusion, the recession and the development of education. Also, the pedagogic leadership of vocational institutions has been developed by investigating and sharing good practices (Jäppinen, 2007; Jäppinen & Maunonen-Eskelinen, 2012). Moreover, vocational special education has been developed (Rinne & Järvinen, 2011; Vanttaja & Rinne, 2008). These efforts reflect the objective to develop educational processes and the quality of VET in general.

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