

Flexible vocational learning pathways: the Finnish VET Reform



Finland

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The Finnish VET reform encompasses a competence-based approach with flexible and individual learning pathways, which is compatible with ECVET principles.

Short summary paragraph

The IVET reform was introduced in early 2018. Learning outcomes are at the heart of this reform, and how and where learning is acquired is not important. The new approach combines a competence-based system with flexible, individual learning pathways. The reform is a response to the increasing take-up for VET, alongside the need to use public funding more effectively. Furthermore, VET had to respond more swiftly to the changes in working life.

Scope of project/initiative

National

When was the project/initiative implemented?

Since 2018

What were the source(s) of funding?

National

Why was/is the project implemented?

VET is perceived as an attractive learning pathway in Finland, with around 280,000 students participating in VET each year (200,000 for IVET and 80,000 for CVET). Furthermore, around 44% comprehensive school leavers continue their learning via IVET. There are 165 VET providers, which include municipalities, joint federations of municipalities and private organisations.

The increasing take-up for VET¹, alongside the need to use public funding more effectively, triggered the need for a reform. Furthermore, VET had to respond more swiftly to the changes in working life and the needs of the wider labour market and therefore VET needed to adapt to individual competence needs quickly. In the future, the number of qualifications is likely to decrease, and qualification content is likely to be widened. This will support individual study paths and enable more rapid responses to the changing needs of working life.

Which groups were targeted by the practice?

This reform covers different target groups, including young people; adult learners and other adults, including unemployed people and those that are in work and they would like to upskill or re-skill.

What were the practice's main objectives?

The Finnish VET reform aims to tackle the increasing need for tailored and flexible study pathways, within the context of a changing labour market and changing competence needs. Continual lifelong learning is a core aspect to achieve this objective. At the foundation of the reform is what students learn and what they can do (i.e. learning outcomes), and it is not concerned with where learners have acquired knowledge, or the time used for the studies.

¹ Statistics, available until 2017, show a constant increase of VET students in Finland. For instance, in 2017 the number of students enrolled in VET was 257,382, with an increase of 14,253 when comparing to numbers from 2010 and 25,235 comparing to 2007.

What activities were carried out?

At the heart of the Finnish VET reform is a new way of thinking which encompasses a competence-based system and customer-driven orientation. It also renewed the financing, guidance, operational processes and the organisational structures of VET.

The qualification system has been revised with fewer, but broader qualifications, with the objective to better meet the needs of the labour market and working life. All qualifications are based on units, which can be either compulsory or optional (depending on the chosen VET pathway). Units are built on learning outcomes, which are assessed and recognised on the competences acquired, independently from where they are gained. Prior and parallel learning is also recognised, which allows students to focus only on any missing competences in view of obtaining a qualification (i.e. each student only studies areas in which he or she has no prior competences). During the assessment, each student is evaluated in a practical competence demonstration at a workplace by a teacher and a representative of working life (e.g. an employer or employee). This is also accompanied by a student self-assessment. The competence assessment takes place in a real working environment with real working tasks (e.g. demonstrating the competences for the unit of 'lunch preparation', students will need to prepare a lunch in a restaurant, to be served real customers). If it is not possible to organise the competence demonstration in a real working environment, the assessment can take place in a virtual environment or as a simulation.

The units' approach is often used by employers who want their employees to update their competences. It is also useful by other target groups, such as migrants or other individuals facing life challenges (e.g. early school leavers), who can study small units around other commitments.

Guidance and support for students is available in different places, such as in the workplace and in schools. Teachers play the key role of 'coach' and support students in the creation of their personal competence development plan, personalised to students' needs and ambitions. In Finland, there are five Universities of Applied Science in charge of teachers' training for VET, and, although they are autonomous on the content of the training programmes, counselling is part of all programmes.

The personal competence development plan is created at the beginning of a learners' studies, just after the enrolment, or before the apprenticeship training takes place. All information will be then recorded on the digital platform called eHOKS², which will be live by autumn 2019. The eHOKS system will store personal development plans and it will provide the student with the possibility to check their progress, manage their learning and streamline workplace learning.

Recognition of prior and parallel learning is a core component of the Finnish VET system, which enables early school leavers and adults to re-enter education and training. The skills that have been previously acquired within the formal education system and in non-formal or informal learning contexts can be recognised. Prior learning is assessed at the beginning a person's studies and it is part of the initial discussion between teachers and students concerning their personal competence development plan. Informal and non-formal prior learning is assessed according to the assessment criteria set in the national qualification requirements. The criteria used is exactly the same as that for formal learning. Once validated it is recorded in the personal competence development plan.

A key aspect of the reform is that learning is integrated with more versatile learning environments and working life experiences. This includes work-based learning and apprenticeships as well as the use of simulators and digital platforms. These are part of the personal competence development plan.

Furthermore, the reform introduces a year-round admission system, which allows a continuous application process throughout the year. It also permits a joint application process for those who have completed their comprehensive school studies in the spring, and those who have no upper secondary qualification(s).

² https://www.oph.fi/reformintuki/koulutuksen_jarjestaminen/henkilokohtaistaminen/ehoks

What specific ECVET principles were/are used?

The funding system for VET was revised to encourage greater effectiveness and better outcomes. The funding system consists of four elements:

- ▶ core-funding;
- ▶ performance-based funding;
- ▶ effectiveness funding; and
- ▶ strategy funding.

This new approach to funding aims to provide a strengthened incentive for VET providers to recognise prior learning, and to make sure that learners obtain the right (rather than any) qualification. These arrangements encourage VET providers to recognise and assess prior and parallel learning and to direct students to the right path in a timely manner.

▶ **Principle 1: Qualifications should be composed of clearly defined groups of learning outcomes.**

The Finnish VET system is based on units of learning outcomes, which goes towards building a qualification. The units approach enables learners to acquire a qualification or a supplementary skill set.

▶ **Principle 2: Groups of learning outcomes within a qualification should be capable of independent assessment.**

Units of learning outcomes are independently assessed in working life scenarios by a teacher and an employer, accompanied with a student self-assessment. Individuals can decide to gain a full qualification, or single units to update their skills.

▶ **Principle 3: The assessment of each group of learning outcomes should be properly documented.**

Each unit of learning outcomes are independently assessed in a working life scenario and they are fully documented. This information will be recorded in the eHOKS digital system from autumn 2019.

▶ **Principle 4: Provision of learning opportunities should be arranged to facilitate individuals to achieve groups of learning outcomes.**

Students and teachers work together to agree a personal competence development plan at the beginning of the studies, or before practical training commences. Prior and parallel formal, informal and non-formal learning is also recognised with the system. Additionally, the year-round admissions system allows students to enrol at any time during the year.

▶ **Principle 5: Individuals should have the opportunity to have their learning outcomes validated, irrespective of how and where they have acquired them.**

The key aspect of the Finnish reform is that learners are assessed on their competences, independently from where these have been acquired. In addition, prior or parallel learning acquired through employment or other working experiences can also be assessed and recognised. For instance, the system encourages working life experiences, such as apprenticeships, to be accounted for.

▶ **Principle 6: Individuals should have the opportunity to accumulate their assessed groups of learning outcomes towards a qualification.**

The Finnish VET system allows individuals to have competences recognised, which were previously acquired in formal, informal and non-formal learning contexts. Prior learning is assessed at the beginning of each learner's study path. Informal and non-formal learning are assessed according to the standard competence assessment.

▶ **Principle 7: Individuals should have the opportunity to transfer their groups of learning outcomes validated in one context to other contexts (such as programmes, qualifications, national/regional systems or countries).**

The Finnish VET system provides the possibilities for the recognition of prior or parallel learning from academia, or other non-formal or informal learning contexts, to be recognised. This helps early school leavers, or other vulnerable target groups, to have their learning recognised and re-enter VET.

<p>What specific ECVET principles were/are used?</p>	<p>▶ Principle 8: Processes for development, assessment, validation and recognition of sets of learning outcomes should be transparent and underpinned by quality assurance.</p> <p>Units of learning outcomes are assessed and recorded as part of the personal competence development plan and they will be recorded in eHOKs from autumn 2019. Quality assurance processes are in place as national qualification requirements are prepared in cooperation with employers and representatives from the labour market. National assessment criterion is in place for competence assessments. In addition, an education provider register is in place, as well as use of ECVET Memoranda of Understanding, Learning Agreements and Europass Mobility (in relevant cases).</p>
<p>What was/is the added value of ECVET?</p>	<p>The ECVET principles are the backbone of the revamped Finnish VET system. Finland has moved forward towards a competence-based system with flexible and personalised learning pathways. Qualifications are based on units of learning outcomes, which are independently assessed in working environments or those that are as similar as possible to such environments. They have helped to create the flexibility required to upskill learners via lifelong learning through tailored pathways and recognition of prior learning. This, in particular, allows vulnerable target groups, such as migrants, low skilled adults and early school leavers, to enter or re-enter education. By creating learning plans with each individual, the learner can take control of their own learning journey. In addition, the competence-based approach allows the VET system to be respond more quickly to labour market needs.</p>
<p>Website</p>	<p>https://minedu.fi/en/reform-of-vocational-upper-secondary-education (EN, FI and SE only)</p> <p>Please also see ECVET Magazine Issue 31 for further information</p>



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