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Options, choices and new beginnings – Evaluation of the study paths and counselling of young people in the transition phase between basic and upper secondary education (Vaihtoehtoja, valintoja ja uusia alkuja – Arviointi nuorten opintopoluista ja ohjauksesta perusopetuksen ja toisen asteen nivelvaiheessa)

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In the evaluation, the authors explored the functionality of guidance and counselling towards further studies and career choices in basic education and the functionality of guidance in the introductory phase of studies in upper secondary education and transition-phase education. The evaluation covered basic education, upper secondary education and vocational education and training. The transition-phase education types included in the evaluation were voluntary additional basic education (“year ten”), preparatory education for vocational training (VALMA), instruction preparing for general upper secondary education (LUVA) and long-term programmes of liberal adult education organised by folk high schools.

The functionality of the joint application system and other application methods was also studied in the evaluation. In terms of cooperation in the transition phase, the goal of the evaluation was to evaluate the cooperation of education providers between the different levels of education as well as with youth work and Employment and Economic Development services. Evaluation data was obtained through questionnaires sent to education providers in basic education, upper secondary level and liberal adult education (n = 458) and students who had started their upper secondary or transition-phase education (n = 15,443).

According to the evaluation results, the availability and accessibility of guidance and counselling towards further studies and career choices was primarily good in **basic education**. Most of the students had received the necessary personal guidance and counselling for planning further studies, and the majority felt that their self-knowledge, information acquisition and decision-making skills developed quite well in comprehensive school. Education providers also considered the implementation of individual counselling a strength. Group counselling and the utilisation of peer support in counselling, however, are not realised as effectively as individual counselling.

Moreover, the opportunities of digitalisation should be utilised more systematically in guidance, and classroom guidance should be developed to better support the pupils' thinking, planning and decision-making in terms of further studies. There are also some development needs in organising opportunities to visit educational institutions offering further studies. In addition, learning about working life and periods of work experience should be methodically developed to better serve pupils in planning and decision-making related to further studies and career choices.

The **application processes in the joint application system** for upper secondary education function well, but providers of basic education hoped for more information and clearer instructions when it comes to **discretionary admission**. Students who had started their vocational education and training through **continuous admission** felt that the application process was efficient and the communication concerning student admission was functional. However, the providers should communicate the selection criteria more efficiently and develop counselling and guidance in the application stage. Guidance should also be developed in situations where the applicant is not admitted or the educational institution does not offer education suited to the applicant.

In **upper secondary education and vocational education and training**, the availability and accessibility of guidance in the introductory phase of the studies was primarily good. The students had received the necessary information on the objectives and content of the studies. The students' needs and goals are taken quite well into consideration when planning the studies, but their situation in life should be taken more comprehensively into account and both sectors must develop their needs-based support for learning difficulties and skills.

In the introductory phase of studies, individual guidance is an excellent resource in both upper secondary education and vocational education and training. According to the evaluation results, group guidance is also effective. However, the students' peer support and the utilisation of technology should be taken better into consideration in upper secondary education as well.

The students' opportunity to receive individual guidance and counselling is realised quite well in **the transition-phase education**. Most of the students felt that, when necessary, they had the opportunity to have a private conversation with a counsellor or a teacher. The majority of those who had faced issues in their studies felt that they had received help for their problems. Some of the students, however, felt that they would have needed more support and guidance based on individual needs. Considering the students' situation in life and peer support even more as part of guidance is also important in transition-phase education. The transfer of information concerning students should be developed between basic education and transition-phase education.

Even though the availability and accessibility of guidance in the transition phase is primarily at a good level, some of the students felt that they would have needed more guidance and counselling for planning and choosing further studies in comprehensive school. More opportunities to discuss individual needs with a counsellor are needed, especially when the young person is struggling to find the right path and make choices and decisions. In upper secondary and transition-phase education, some of the students also felt that they would have needed more support to connect with their studies.

Compared to other students, the students who had been repeatedly bullied in comprehensive school or had experienced learning difficulties had a lower opinion of the availability and accessibility of the guidance and its correspondence to their needs. They also felt that their self-knowledge, information acquisition and decision-making skills had developed less than those of others during comprehensive school. The experiences of bullying and learning difficulties were also reflected in the transition to studies after basic education. For this reason, the means to prevent bullying must be intensified and the sense of community between pupils and students must be promoted.

Cooperation between schools, educational institutions, various guidance providers and working life must be increased, developed and renewed. Operating models better supporting transitions, transfer of information and regional development must be created in the transition-phase cooperation.

**Keywords:** Transition phase, transition, basic education, vocational education and training, general upper secondary education, transition-phase education, preparatory education and instruction preparing for the next level of education, liberal adult education, guidance, counselling, career-planning skills, student admission, transition-phase cooperation