

Abstract

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Transitioning from VET to universities of applied sciences – an evaluation of the competences provided by vocational education and training in relation to the requirements of studies at universities of applied sciences

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Between 2022 and 2023, FINEEC carried out an evaluation on how the competence of students with a vocational qualification meets the requirements of universities of applied sciences. The evaluation focused on examining how vocational education and training (VET) supports the development of knowledge and skills required for studies at universities of applied sciences (UAS), as well as how UASs support students' success, recognising the strengths and weaknesses of those with a VET background. The goal was also to increase mutual understanding between the different actors within VET and UAS education. The evaluation aimed to promote pathways from VET to higher education. Increasing the population's level of education has been a long-standing objective of Finland's education policy. Achieving this requires that more VET graduates continue to higher education in the future.

The evaluation data was collected through surveys conducted by FINEEC, targeting universities of applied sciences and their staff and VET providers. Student workshops were also organised to gather data, and results of surveys conducted by other parties, as well as statistics and register data, were also utilised in the evaluation. The initial conclusions and recommendations were refined with stakeholders in a development webinar before finalising them.

The number of UAS students with a vocational qualification has steadily increased since 2019. In 2021, almost 50 % of new UAS students were VET graduates. According to VET providers and UAS management and staff, essential knowledge and skills required in further studies include study skills, communication skills, proficiency in foreign languages and competence in mathematics and science. VET providers also highlighted that vocational competence is a key competence required in further studies.

On average, VET graduates' level of competence in common units (communication and interaction, mathematics and science, citizenship and working life skills) was good. Students demonstrated the highest competence in citizenship and working life skills while showing lower proficiency in mathematics and science. Universities of applied sciences acknowledge vocational competence, work experience and workplace skills as strengths in students who have completed a vocational qualification. In terms of study skills, there is variation among students; some have strong study

skills and motivation, while others have weaker skills. In addition to study skills, the management and staff of UASs also identify deficiencies in the communication skills, foreign language proficiency and mathematics and science proficiency of students with a vocational qualification.

In VET, there is room for improvement, particularly in terms of common units, in delivering education that aligns with students' goals. Furthermore, in the documents guiding their pedagogical activities, just over 50 % of VET providers describe how they support the development of knowledge and skills required in further studies. VET students interested in pursuing further education are typically directed to pathway studies or other studies that will develop their skills for further studies.

In terms of universities of applied sciences, there is room for improvement in their processes for recognising VET graduates' prior learning. Just over half of UAS employees responsible for drawing up personal study plans consistently enquire whether students have competences acquired through their vocational qualification or employment that could be recognised as part of their UAS studies.

The evaluation discovered that VET providers and universities of applied sciences collaborate extensively, but the effectiveness of the collaboration should be assessed and developed in a systematic way. For example, there was relatively limited collaboration in developing guidelines for guidance.

The evaluation revealed differences between the reality and assumptions regarding VET graduates' ability to succeed in UAS studies. Some VET students lack confidence in their potential to study at a university of applied sciences. They do not believe they will succeed in the entrance exams. They are also afraid that studying will be too hard and that they will not receive adequate support. Some UAS teachers and members of the guidance staff feel that VET graduates have inadequate skills for further study. The evaluation results indicate that universities of applied sciences offer various forms of support to students to ensure their study progress. Students progress well in their studies, and the graduation rate is even slightly higher than that of students who have completed general upper secondary education. Furthermore, based on the evaluation, we can say that VET providers and universities of applied sciences need fact-based information about how well VET graduates succeed in their studies at universities of applied sciences.

Development recommendations

VET providers

- VET providers should ensure that the teaching students receive in common units aligns with the students' goals.
- VET providers should ensure that career guidance for students includes ongoing support for further studies as an integral component, alongside guidance for employment. In addition, students planning to enter the workforce should be reminded that they also have the option to pursue higher education at a later stage.
- To ensure the quality of teaching, VET providers should describe how they support the development of knowledge and skills required in further studies as part of common units, vocational units, further vocational qualifications and specialist vocational qualifications. This description should be included in the document guiding the VET provider's

pedagogical activities. When drawing up the personal competence development plan, a plan should also be made for building the competences necessary for further studies.

Universities of applied sciences

- UASs should take the students' existing vocational competence into account when planning individual study paths.
- UASs should develop their approach to making personal study plans to consistently identify students' competences acquired through vocational education and training, employment or other means.
- All UASs should establish procedures for identifying missing competences needed to complete studies and developing these competences. It is recommended that UASs work in collaboration with VET providers when developing such procedures.

VET providers and universities of applied sciences

- In terms of pathway studies, universities of applied sciences and VET providers should work together to set responsibilities for guidance and define the forms of support offered during the studies, ensuring students receive the support and guidance they need to complete their studies successfully.

Finnish National Agency for Education, VET providers, universities of applied sciences

- Increasing the percentage of young people with a higher education degree is a national objective. This requires that more VET students see higher education as an option for them. To achieve this objective, the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Finnish National Agency for Education, VET providers and universities of applied sciences must work together.

Keywords: vocational education and training (VET), universities of applied sciences, knowledge and skills required in further studies