

Abstract



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Smooth transitions – Evaluation of the functioning of study paths leading from vocational education and training to universities of applied sciences and cooperation between educational levels (Liikettä niveliin – Ammatillisesta koulutuksesta ammatikorkeakouluun johtavien opintopolkujen ja koulutusasteiden yhteistyön toimivuus)

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The aim of the evaluation was to produce information about the functioning of the study paths leading from vocational education and training (VET) to universities of applied sciences (UAS). The evaluation targets were the guidance and counselling for UAS studies in VET, selection of students from the perspective of students following the vocational study path, students' study and studying capabilities, and organizing and counselling of studies at the UAS, as well as practices related to recognition of prior learning and competence. The evaluation also produces information about the cooperation between UASs and VET providers in building study paths, developing and implementing education, and developing working life. The evaluation target group comprised providers of VET leading to a qualification (N=151) as well as UASs (N=25). The evaluation data comprised a questionnaire directed at all VET providers and UASs belonging to the target group and focus group interviews among students and staff of providers of VET and UASs, as well as representatives of working life.

Operating methods of guidance and counselling students to further studies in VET are: guidance integrated in education and training and student counselling, enabling combined degree qualifications (double- or triple-degree qualifications), coaching studies provided by education providers, as well as giving students access to UAS studies. In VET that lead to vocational upper secondary qualification, enabling combined degree qualifications was the second most common form of guiding students to further studies, just behind guidance performed via integration principle. In apprenticeship

training and competence-based education, there was little guidance towards further studies. The same applies to vocational further education and training. Key development needs in VET were: clarifying operating methods for guiding and counselling students to further studies and making them systematic at provider level, as well as qualitative development of guidance and counselling and ensuring functionality. Access to and timing of guidance and counselling should also be developed. Students wanted more information and guidance on further study opportunities and at an earlier stage.

Student selection for UASs continues to appear unclear to students and there is a need to clarify selection criteria. Positive development has already started, now that the challenges of the path have been recognised and the selection criteria recommendations of UASs have been reformed accordingly. Moreover, a joint student selection system has been introduced. The transition to further studies is boosted by open UAS study paths and the creation of smooth channels from vocational upper secondary level to UASs. With regard to the development of the study capabilities of students choosing the UAS channel at the upper secondary level, it is important to pay attention to the processing of information and theoretical material and raise further study capabilities up alongside working life capabilities. Competence-based approach at UASs already enable recognition of prior learning and competence, which nonetheless requires clearer conceptualisation and criteria by degrees.

VET providers and UASs cooperate in communication related to UAS studies, but cooperation related to the transition phase and career counselling is not common, and developing it is seen important among both educational levels. With regard to the planning and implementation of education and teaching, both educational levels consider the most important cooperation, which is linked with providing access to UAS studies to VET students, recognising prior competence, arranging learning environments and the marketing of education. Cooperation in developing education was also seen as important. Despite all this, cooperation related to education and teaching is negligible as a whole. Consolidation of cooperation between UASs and VET providers requires strategic will. There is a willingness to cooperate, but clear objectives are lacking or are weak.

So far, the educational levels do not cooperate extensively in developing working life, even though both considered it important. Current cooperation emphasises forecasting competence and education needs, regional development work and projects related to working life development. However, the cooperation is based more on personal relationships or cooperation with individual companies than on shared strategic activities of education providers to develop working and business life in the area.

In the current difficult economic situation, it is especially important to know how to allocate resources correctly. Awareness of the key significance of guidance and counselling is key to strengthening cooperation and improving the results of the operations. Clear recognition of challenges during the transition stage and consolidation of cooperation will lead not only to the development of the staff's competence, but will also improve the study completion times for students while ensuring full

utilisation of competence. Consequently, a smooth transition phase is also a critical factor for national competitiveness.

Based on the evaluation materials, the evaluation group gives the following development recommendations:

- Vocational education and training must offer counselling related to further studies at an early enough stage, and the knowledge needs of students related to further studies must be mapped in more detail.
- Guiding and counselling students to further studies must be ensured in all provision formats of vocational education and training and at all educational levels. Counselling forms and methods must be further developed so that they better correspond to the needs of students. It is important that opportunities afforded by close counselling and digitisation are taken advantage of when developing guidance and counselling services.
- Vocational education and training providers must develop career, guidance and counselling services in a unified manner so that they may help to ensure that students are adequately informed, that guidance activities are systematic, and that cooperation is developed at the transition phase together with universities of applied sciences (UAS) and other partners.
- The practice of evaluating prior competence must be harmonised at UASs. In the funding of UASs, all credits accepted for a degree must have the same weight.
- The new selection criteria for UASs must offer more balanced opportunities to seek education than before. It is crucial in the development and implementation of the new criteria that all UASs commit to them.
- Communication related to student selection must provide diverse and up-to-date materials and utilise social media effectively.
- The functioning of the transition stage must be promoted through joint planning between educational levels and joint implementation of coaching preparing students for UAS studies, which may also take advantage of best practices developed elsewhere. Joint use of learning environments and teacher exchange must be increased while simultaneously developing joint study modules, for example, in projects and virtually. There is a great deal of untapped potential in the utilisation of open UAS studies. Cooperation with various stakeholders in career counselling development must also be increased at both educational levels.
- Working life cooperation is an essential part of the educational task. The utilisation of learning environments implemented in cooperation with companies and other working life parties must be developed further, as must cooperation related to learning on the job. Cooperation between vocational education and training providers and UASs is also an important development target. Deeper cooperation and shared practices also promote regional development.
- Performance management by the ministry must be used to encourage education providers and UASs to develop the functioning of the vocational channel through increased cooperation and development of procedures to recognise prior competence. This encouragement must also include strategic funding to develop study

paths, recognition of prior competence, guidance and counselling of students and increasing cooperation. As a focus area for funding systems, further studies must be equal to employment.

Keywords

Vocational education and training, university of applied sciences, transition phase, study path, vocational channel, student selection, study capabilities, recognition of prior competence, working life cooperation