

**Publisher**

Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC)

**Name of publication**

SPECIAL NEEDS SUPPORT AS A RESOURCE – Evaluation of the provision of special needs support in vocational education and training

**Authors**

Jani Goman, Raisa Hievanen, Johanna Kiesi, Mari Huhtanen, Taneli Vuojus, Seija Eskola, Seija Karvonen, Kristina Kullas-Norrgård, Tuomo Lahtinen, Anneli Majanen & Jaakko Ristolainen

The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) evaluated the provision of special needs support in vocational education and training in 2020–2021. In particular, the evaluation produced information about the arrangements made for special needs support and their effectiveness: identifying needs for support, planning of support, forms of support and guidance, availability and accessibility of support, and practices for adapting assessment of competence and making exceptions to vocational competence requirements or to key competence requirements.

Evaluation data were obtained through surveys addressed to VET providers (n = 92) and teaching and guidance personnel (n = 2,379) as well as interviews with students needing special support (n = 50). The evaluation also drew on data contained in the education administration's reporting portal Vipunen and Koski data repository on students needing special support and their studies.

The evaluation results indicate that the most common methods for identifying special support needs include interviews, observations, tests, surveys, and information exchanges at the transition phase of education. In the rolling application procedure, new students' needs for support are not identified as systematically as in the other application procedures. The identification is also less effective in the context of further and specialist vocational qualifications than initial vocational qualifications.

In the planning of special support, the recording of planned support measures in students' personal competence development plans (PCDP) and students' participation in agreeing on support measures were implemented well, whereas there is room for improvement in the planning of support for qualification units, the recording of implemented support measures, and regular assessment of the effectiveness of support. Those teaching and guiding the students should have sufficient knowledge of the support measures agreed for the students and the means by which the support is delivered. The evaluation results indicate that information flows and cooperation between personnel members could be improved in this respect.

By developing the support forms and delivery of support, support should be made more compatible with different qualification types, units and learning environments. The evaluation findings show that in VET aiming for initial vocational qualifications, support is delivered less effectively for vocational qualification units than for common units. Attention should also be paid to further and specialist vocational qualifications, in which support is provided less effectively than in initial vocational qualifications. Regarding learning environments, the availability of support should be improved in workplace education and training, competence demonstrations and distance learning. The practices of adapting assessment of competence and making exceptions to vocational competence requirements or to key competence requirements should also be clarified.

A large number of teaching and guidance personnel members found that the responsibilities and division of duties related to special needs support were unclear. Consequently, the roles of those working in different tasks should be disambiguated, and cooperation between special needs teachers, those teaching different qualification units and other guidance personnel should be intensified. Personnel competence related to special needs support should also be reinforced. The evaluation findings indicate that competence development is currently not very systematic. In particular, the ability of teachers of common and vocational qualification units to identify special support needs and support students should be improved. Sufficient competence should be ensured in all fields of vocational education and training. Education providers should increase and develop co-teaching and guidance as part of delivering special needs support. The significance of shared expertise and the consultative role of special needs teachers should be strengthened.

Adequate personnel resources and time should be allocated to identifying special support needs as well as planning and delivering support. At the level of education providers, allocation of the increased central government transfers for special needs support to these activities should be made more visible. Improving the monitoring of allocation using suitable indicator data is also important to evaluate the adequacy of resources and to allocate them appropriately between fields of vocational education and training, qualification types and locations.

Transition phase cooperation between basic education and VET should be developed further in the areas of student guidance and information exchanges, and information about special needs support in vocational education and training should be communicated more effectively to basic education. Transition phase cooperation should start earlier for those students who experience learning challenges in basic education. In addition to pedagogical support measures, some students also need other types of support. The evaluation findings show that while education providers' and educational institutions' cooperation with student health care and social welfare services works relatively well, cooperation with psychologist services, youth services and employment and economic development services should be developed.

The relationship between special needs support and other forms of learning support and guidance should be clarified. Practical tools and practices for identifying support needs and defining different forms and levels of support should be developed in cooperation by VET providers, vocational special education institutes, the Finnish National Agency for Education and the Ministry of Education and Culture. The availability of intensive special needs support and the adequacy of VET places in different areas should be ensured. Students' possibilities to move from one form of support

to another should be developed further, and cooperation between general and special education institutes should be intensified. At the education system level, it is important to develop special needs support as a sufficiently clear-cut whole with a structure that appears logical to students, their guardians and stakeholders at different levels of education.

The following development recommendations were issued as a result of the evaluation:

1. Sufficient resources for special needs support should be ensured, and the allocation of resources should be clarified.
2. The systematic nature of special needs support, as well as the division of labour and cooperation between personnel members should be improved.
3. Personnel competence related to special support should be reinforced.
4. Identification of support needs should be developed for students admitted through the rolling application procedure and in further and specialist vocational qualifications.
5. The planning of special needs support for qualification units should be developed, and the flow of information between teaching and guidance personnel should be improved.
6. The forms and delivery of special needs support and assessment of its effectiveness should be developed.
7. The availability of suitable workplaces, orientation of workplace instructors and support for students in workplace education and training should be improved.
8. The practices for adapting assessment of competence and making exceptions to vocational competence requirements or to key competence requirements.
9. The interfaces between the different levels and forms of support should be disambiguated.
10. Transition phase and multiprofessional cooperation related to special support should be developed.

**Keywords:** evaluation, vocational education and training, special needs support, personalisation, workplace education and training, adaptation of assessment of competence, exception to vocational competence requirements or to key competence requirements