

Publisher

Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC)

Title of publication

PARTICIPATION IS BUILT TOGETHER – Students' growth into active and critical citizens in upper secondary education

Authors

Veera Hakamäki-Stylman, Mari Huhtanen, Paula Kilpeläinen, Aino-Maria Pusa, Niina Rumpu, Salla Venäläinen, Osmo Huhtala, Sari Multasuo, Tiina Mustonen, Virva Viljanen & Niklas Wahlström

In 2020–2021, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) evaluated the capacity of vocational education and training (VET) and general upper secondary education to strengthen students' growth into active and critical citizens. The evaluation focuses on the development of students' participation, community cohesion and civic competences and the role of student bodies in this process.

In this evaluation, community cohesion and participation are examined as the feeling of belonging to and participating in a group and as participation in the operations of the educational institution and societal affairs. In addition to this, the evaluation emphasises students' opportunities to influence decision-making that impacts them personally or matters relevant to them.

The evaluation provides information on how VET and general upper secondary education prepare students for becoming active and critical citizens. The evaluation helps determine how the growth of students into active and critical citizens is supported in the operations of general upper secondary schools and vocational institutions and how the contents of the national qualification requirements for VET qualifications and the national core curriculum for general upper secondary education and pedagogic activities support students' growth into active and critical citizens. Furthermore, the evaluation examines how student body activities support the growth of students into active and critical citizens.

The evaluation material consisted of education providers' institution-specific self-evaluations and individual surveys aimed at students. Education providers carried out the self-evaluations in multifaceted groups that included management representatives, teachers, guidance counsellors, student welfare personnel and other persons working in positions relevant to the theme of the evaluation. The self-evaluation included questions about students' community cohesion, participation, student body activities and the development of their civic competences during studies. As regards VET providers, responses to the self-evaluation were received from 88 providers, with the response rate being 79%. Of the 120 general upper secondary schools included in the sample, 82 completed the self-evaluation, with the response rate being 68 %.

A student survey was used to survey students' experiences regarding student body activities, community cohesion, participation, opportunities to exert influence at their educational institution and the development of personal civic competences. Responses to the student survey were collected from VET students at the end of their vocational upper secondary qualifications and from general upper secondary school students at the end of their studies. Responses were received from a total of 3,485 VET students and 2,761 general upper secondary school students.

According to the results, the majority of students feel that they are a part of the school community and of the work community during periods of work experience. The majority of students assessed the atmosphere at their educational institution to be good and the personnel to be easy to approach. Various events were highlighted as being important for building and maintaining community cohesion. On the other hand, students who had experienced bullying and who did not feel that they were part of the school community evaluated factors related to community cohesion and participation notably more negatively than other students. Other factors that prevent the building of community cohesion at educational institutions include the fragmentation of studies and study groups and lack of time. Continuous admission, individual study paths and periods of work experience in VET and the course-based nature of general upper secondary education also present challenges in regard to experiencing and building community cohesion.

According to the results, the majority of education providers have operating principles and policies that support participation. Students' opportunities to exert influence are usually well communicated at educational institutions, and for the most part students are aware of how and what they can influence. Educational institutions collect feedback about their operations, but the processing of this feedback with students is infrequent. According to the evaluation, students do not have much influence over certain teaching-related matters, such as the completion method of studies or the tools used in studies. However, the content and implementation of studies were highlighted as matters that students themselves would like to have influence over.

According to students, the main reasons for participating or not participating in the educational institution's shared activities or student body activities were personal motivation and interest. Students who considered these matters important were more motivated to participate in them. On the other hand, some students felt that their studies were so demanding that they did not have any time for participation or influence activities.

According to the results, the operations of the boards of student bodies, including their role and position, are not always clear to students. Student body activities are relevant to only a small portion of upper secondary education students, and there were major differences between educational institutions in the operating methods, organisation and resource allocation of student bodies. The boards of student bodies mainly organise events that promote community cohesion, but participation in decision-making related to the operations of the educational institution is less common. Furthermore, some students feel that they have not received enough information about participating in the operations of the boards of student bodies.

Education providers were of the opinion that they are well-equipped to support the development of students' civic competences during their studies. However, the theme of active citizenship is not discussed enough within educational institutions and between different subjects. Students were also of the opinion that they had gained good studying, cooperation, information gathering, societal and civic competences during their studies. Most of all, students felt that they had learned to take responsibility for their own studies. In contrast, students were of the opinion that their educational institutions had not provided them with much support in regard to managing everyday life and making other life decisions. In addition to lessons, students felt that they had learned things related to civic competences from their close circle, such as guardians and friends. Students considered voting to be a moderately likely method to exert influence now and in the future. In addition to voting, other ways of exerting influence that were highlighted as characteristic of students included purchase decisions, signing initiatives, appeals or petitions and participating in volunteer work.

Based on the results of the evaluation, the following development recommendations were made:

1. Educational institutions should define what equality and non-discrimination mean and how they are realised in practical operations.

The operations of educational institutions should be based on equality and non-discrimination and the valuing of diversity. According to legislation, educational institutions must have a plan and operating procedures for preventing and intervening in bullying and discrimination. An official plan and operating procedures create the foundation for the educational institution's operations and contribute to the safety of the members of the school community. These should be thoroughly integrated into the educational institution's everyday operations and operating culture. Students, staff and management should discuss the meaning of equality and non-discrimination together so that it is clear to all members of the school community how they are expected to act and behave. Additionally, diversity should be considered a richness and resource at educational institutions. The valuing of diversity can be strengthened by increasing the numbers and diversity of student members in the educational institution's various working groups, for example.

2. It is the duty of management to promote the building of participation and community cohesion, and the entire educational institution must commit to their realisation in everyday operations.

Participation must be considered a common, shared value at educational institutions, one that defines the operations of the educational institution. Participation must be highlighted in a value strategy governing the overall operation of the educational institution, which defines concrete operating procedures and areas of responsibility in regard to the realisation of community cohesion and participation.

The structure and demands of studies and the diversity of students present their own challenges in terms of the realisation of community cohesion, which must be taken into account in the efforts to build participation and community cohesion. Furthermore,

experiences of bullying may decrease community cohesion, and students who are in a vulnerable position need more support for integrating into the community. Community-oriented activities should be organised with an emphasis on keeping the participation threshold as low as possible for all students.

The management and other staff play a key role in the building and maintaining of community cohesion. As such, a sufficient amount of resources must be allocated to training management and other staff. Familiarisation with research-based information promotes understanding of the impact of community cohesion and participation in learning, motivation and well-being. It is vital for the entire staff to participate in the building of community cohesion to make it a natural part of everyday operations. This also requires shared discussion about values and the translation of this discussion into concrete, everyday actions.

3. Education providers and educational institutions should offer students diverse ways of participating and exerting influence.

Students should be able to influence matters that are relevant to both the student and the operation of the educational institution. It is important for students to have opportunities to influence the organisation of teaching, the completion of studies and the development of the educational institution's operations, in addition to everyday functions. The educational institution's management and staff play a key role in determining the position that students are assigned in the educational institution's participation and influence activities. The educational institution's staff and students should engage in active dialogue about the individual needs, thoughts and opinions of students. The staff should systematically include students in decision-making processes, starting from planning. Students should be provided with various and alternative ways to participate and influence the operations of the educational institution. Providing low-threshold ways of exerting influence corresponding to students' needs and utilising digitalisation could activate and motivate students to participate.

The collection of student feedback and the processing of said feedback with students should be a systematic part of the educational institution's everyday operations in order to strengthen community cohesion. In addition to this, the utilisation of feedback in the development of operations should be strengthened. Seeing feedback lead to concrete actions at educational institutions motivates students to keep participating in the development of operations.

4. The operations of the boards of student bodies should be clarified and diversified.

Education providers and the management of educational institutions should inform students of the ways in which the boards of student bodies can exert influence. Teachers also play a key role in encouraging students to participate in the activities of student body boards. Communication about student body activities should be regular and carried out through multiple channels so as to reach all students.

The diversity of the student body, such as the gender identity and cultural background of students, and in VET the age and field of study of students, should be taken into account better in the composition of student body boards. The participation of students with different backgrounds in student body board activities should be supported. Furthermore, students should be provided with diverse ways of participating in these activities, such as ways that are not bound to specific times or places. Participation could be increased by offering opportunities to participate for shorter periods or influence individual matters that students are interested in. Furthermore, the educational institution should ensure sufficient resources for student body board activities, such as facilities, a budget and personnel resources, which could also contribute to increasing the visibility, influence and appreciation of the student body board.

5. The theme of active citizenship should be integrated into all teaching and the operating culture and everyday operation of the educational institution. Furthermore, students' participation in shared influence activities should be integrated into studies.

The theme of active citizenship and its integration into all studies should be more widely discussed across subject boundaries. The promotion of community cohesion and participation and the development of students' civic competences should be viewed as the shared responsibility of the entire staff. It is important to incorporate topical social phenomena and themes into teaching. Perspectives on democracy and human rights education should be widely incorporated into different subjects. It is also important to practice different civic competences and ways of exerting influence, such as discussion skills, as part of studies.

Integrating participation in student body board activities into studies could increase students' interest in student body board activities and influencing opportunities. Incorporating student body activities into the studies offered by the educational institution could also increase students' awareness and appreciation of them and thus promote participation in the activities. In addition to student body activities, it is important to also identify ways of exerting influence outside of the educational institution. Educational institutions should have a clear structure for integrating the educational institution's internal and other societal influencing into studies. All students should be aware of the possibility of incorporating different influencing and participation activities into their studies. This type of structure would contribute to the realisation of active citizenship beyond the educational institution itself.

6. Ways and places of exerting influence that are characteristic of students should be better identified and utilised.

Staff should be aware of the diverse ways in which students exert influence so that different ways of exerting influence are more comprehensively highlighted in teaching and the other activities of the educational institution. Ways of exerting influence that are characteristic of students can be identified by asking students about them directly. Civic competences and opportunities for exerting influence can be developed in collaboration with students utilising social media, various applications and cooperation networks, for example. Networking

with the student bodies of other educational institutions, youth councils and student associations is an important way of exerting influence, one that should be made a natural part of the activities of student body boards.

Keywords: Community cohesion, participation, civic competences, vocational education and training (VET), general upper secondary education