

3. FINNISH VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN TRANSITION

INTRODUCTION

In European educational policies, initial vocational education and training (IVET) has a rather low status since it leads to lower-paid employment and lower-status occupations compared to higher education programmes. IVET's position is also diminished by the fact that the vocational educational paths are chosen by those whose parents come from a lower educational background than the parents of children studying in general upper secondary education (Virolainen & Stenström, 2014). However, not all students are interested in academic studies. The counter-development of academic content in vocational education and training (VET) has been emphasised since the early 2000s, when the curricula of Finnish VET were reformed to include an on-the-job training period and skills demonstrations (Koukku, Kyrö, Packalén, & Volmari, 2012; Virolainen & Stenström, 2014).

By 2008, the share of those choosing IVET immediately after the completion of compulsory education had increased to 42% and has remained at 41–42% since then (Koukku et al., 2012; Official Statistics of Finland [OSF], 2017). At the same time, the share of those continuing in general upper secondary education has been 50–53% (OSF, 2017). This increased level of participation in IVET makes the Finnish model distinctive and interesting concerning the vocational education systems of the other Nordic countries, as well as other European countries. Based on their comparative analyses of Nordic countries, Germany and the United Kingdom, Stenström and Virolainen (2014) conclude that Finland has managed to improve the image of VET. There are several reasons for this, some accidental and some because of strategic planning. For example, one somewhat accidental cultural outcome is the visibility of chefs and gardeners in popular media. Due to strategic development, the internationalisation of IVET has improved its status as well as competitiveness in national and international skills competitions. Still, the most important elements of success are the general eligibility for higher education in all upper secondary education and the establishment of applied science universities that offer interesting higher education routes for VET graduates.

During the last few decades, the Finnish VET has been developed as a continuum to respond to the needs of the labour market and the society in general (Teräs, 2017). In this respect, the Finnish vocational education policy can be regarded as evolutionary in nature (cf. Sahlberg, 2011). However, in 2017, the Finnish VET Act

673/2017) was reformed, combining the different parts of VET developed in the past. We claim that these changes can be regarded as revolutionary (cf. Sahlberg, 2011) as they contain many new elements while, at the same time, funding for VET was reduced. The reduced financing, combined with new policies and concepts, create a worrying mixture. The current voices from the school field are dissonant, especially in schools that have begun to put the new policies into practice. The reform concerns not only the practice and pedagogy of VET but also the administration and financial criteria.

In this chapter, the current changes in Finnish VET are analysed. Because the reform took place in Finland just when writing this, during the academic year of 2017–2018, there are no profound research results of the reform's effects yet. Thus, our analysis is based on mapping the threats and strengths of the renewed VET system. In our argumentation, we rely on some relevant research knowledge, official statistics and the documents of the Finnish national educational administration authorities, the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) and the Finnish National Agency of Education (EDUFI). Besides that, we have done some unofficial interviews with VET teachers and have searched various news and articles in the Finnish media. Before we begin the analysis, a brief history of vocational training is introduced to better understand the present.

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It is interesting to compare the current goals of Finnish VET to the early years of official vocational training. This comparison gives perspective to the current era.

The Early Development of VET

With industrialisation, vocational training was used as a way to achieve social control when towns began to establish schools that prepared students for various occupations. In the early 20th century, important tasks included getting the young people off the streets and enhancing possibilities to earn one's living with different kinds of handicraft skills (Klemelä, 2000).

Originally, VET was divided under the administration of several ministries. Different vocational qualifications were offered by private and state education organisers. For example, in 1920's, the state organised education for timber supervisors, nurses and seafaring. The private sector took responsibility for farming, householding and craft industries, and also received subsidies from the state (Klemelä, 2000).

After the Second World War, the focus of the Finnish economy shifted from farming to industry and services, and the Finnish state took more responsibility for vocational training. New occupations were born and, hence, school-based education became necessary. The increase of vocational education institutions was rapid during the 1950s and 1960s in Finland (Klemelä, 2000). The time between the 1940s and