

Chapter 8

Promoting the Standing of VET in Finland: Balancing the Different Aims of VET



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Abstract According to EU policy, two factors are considered critical for ensuring the attractiveness of vocational education and training (VET): high quality learning pathways that are flexible and permeable and links between education and the world of work. In Finland, multiple VET-related reforms have been enacted in recent years. The VET reform highlighted individual study paths and flexibility, the extension of compulsory education placed further emphasis on youth education and the reform of continuous learning emphasised upskilling and reskilling opportunities. In this chapter, the standing of VET is first discussed based on statistical data. A small-scale Delphi study with a panel of experts was conducted to examine the current standing of VET in more detail and to reveal developments and future directions that could facilitate the promotion of VET. The results indicate that instead of continuous reforms and development projects, long-term development focused on improving quality is required, which can only be achieved with the support of stable funding. Nevertheless, the findings imply that implementing measures to promote the standing of VET will require effort, as the task will involve finding a balance between the different target groups and varying aims of VET as a promoter of social inclusion and economic growth and between employment and further education pathways.

Keywords Vocational education and training · Finland · Standing · Status · Attractiveness · Policy · Reform · Parity of esteem · Permeability · Learning pathways · Lifelong learning · Flexibility · Quality · Funding

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Policy Guidelines for Developing the Standing of VET

Vocational education and training (VET) systems are not static; rather, they are shaped by factors such as policy developments and domestic institutional changes (Trampusch, 2009). In an era defined by digitalisation, new business models, demographic changes, sustainability, and economic crises, there are high expectations for VET. At the European policy level, the New Skills Agenda for Europe (European Commission, 2016) has demonstrated its strong focus on ‘making VET a first choice’ in two ways: by increasing its attractiveness through the quality, flexibility, and permeability of learning pathways to higher education (HE) and by establishing closer links with the world of work. Furthermore, the European Council’s (European Commission, 2020) recommendation on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience emphasised that it must serve as a driver for innovation, growth, and sustainability; adapt to labour market changes; and become learner-centred, inclusive, and accessible. To complement and operationalise its vision and strategic objectives, the recent Osnabrück Declaration (EU Council, 2020) made by ministers in charge of VET in EU countries conceptualised new policy actions and also suggested that the attractiveness of VET could be enhanced through higher quality, adaptability, flexibility, inclusiveness, and permeability of learning pathways.

A recent education policy report by the Finnish Government (2021) outlined their targets for education and research towards 2040. The report stated that education and competence levels should improve and that equal opportunities for learning and education should be offered. Regarding VET, the report highlighted the importance of diminishing the boundaries between general education (GEN) and VET, setting the following three objectives and actions needed for the further development of upper secondary education:

- (i) *Promote equity and equality* by introducing new technologies, promoting individualisation of studies, securing student welfare services, lowering boundaries between GEN and VET and adding common units in qualifications.
- (ii) *Strengthen responses to changes in the world of work* by building partnerships between it and education, adding possibilities for workplace learning and mobilities, and crossing boundaries between different levels and fields of education.
- (iii) *Enhance the impact of upper secondary education and promote accessibility* by developing digital services, encouraging the sharing of resources (such as facilities, staff, and equipment) between different levels of education and reforming the structure of education providers (e.g., mergers between VET and general upper secondary providers).

In summation, it would appear that these developments highlight individual study paths and promote bringing VET closer to GEN (such as through common units in qualifications that promote generic skills). In addition, they highlight the need for closer connections to the world of work. In practice, upper secondary education is

expected to work collaboratively to ensure the accessibility of education. As the education policy report was drafted by the Finnish government, it is closely linked to current reforms, strategies, and developments adopted in VET, which are discussed in this chapter. Specifically, this discussion relates to the current position and aims of VET within the education system. By comparing the aims and developments, it is argued within the chapter that promoting the standing of VET requires finding the balance between different objectives. First, an overview of the standing of VET in Finland is presented, followed by a discussion of the reforms and strategies. Although the focus is on policy developments specifically related to VET, it should be noted that next to international and national policy initiatives, there are various levels of development that are inevitably related to the standing and status of VET, including curriculum initiatives and practices (see also Billett et al., 2022).

The Standing of VET in Finland

The standing of VET is usually combined with its position in the education system and the value of qualifications (Lasonen & Manning, 2001). Furthermore, the status and attractiveness of VET are widely related to opportunities provided by VET qualifications in the labour market or further education (FE), the status of occupations and the subjective standards of living (Lasonen & Gordon, 2008; Protsch & Solga, 2016; Russo et al., 2019). In practical terms, the attractiveness of VET is visible in educational preferences and enrolments (Busemeyer & Garritzmann, 2017; Russo et al., 2019).

In Finland, both the VET system and GEN are situated within the upper secondary level. When the standing of VET in the education system is studied from the perspective of enrolments (in 2019), 40% of compulsory school leavers continued in vocational education and 54% in GEN, while 2.4% did not continue their studies at the upper secondary level (Official Statistics of Finland, 2020a). Figure 8.1 presents an overview of the transitions of compulsory school leavers from 2000 to 2019. It can be observed that a larger share of compulsory school leavers continued in GEN than in VET. Moreover, within two decades, an average of 7545.6 students ($SD = 2273.394$) continued in GEN. The figure also indicates that the greatest gap between pathways was between 2000 and 2004 ($M = 11070.0$, $SD = 654.123$), although it eventually narrowed to an average level of 6371 students (ranging from 5179 to 8781, $SD = 988.323$). The number of students who did not continue their studies after compulsory education was naturally lower and has remained quite stable over the years ($M = 4510.7$, $SD = 1557.940$). In comparison, the average number of non-continuing students was clearly at a lower level ($M = 1829.3$, $SD = 491.602$) between 2014 and 2017.

Overall, the image of VET is quite positive in Finland. However, compared to GEN, recent image surveys suggest that VET is less respected (see Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021a). Moreover, GEN is considered to offer an excellent basis for higher education and strong general knowledge, whereas it is assumed that

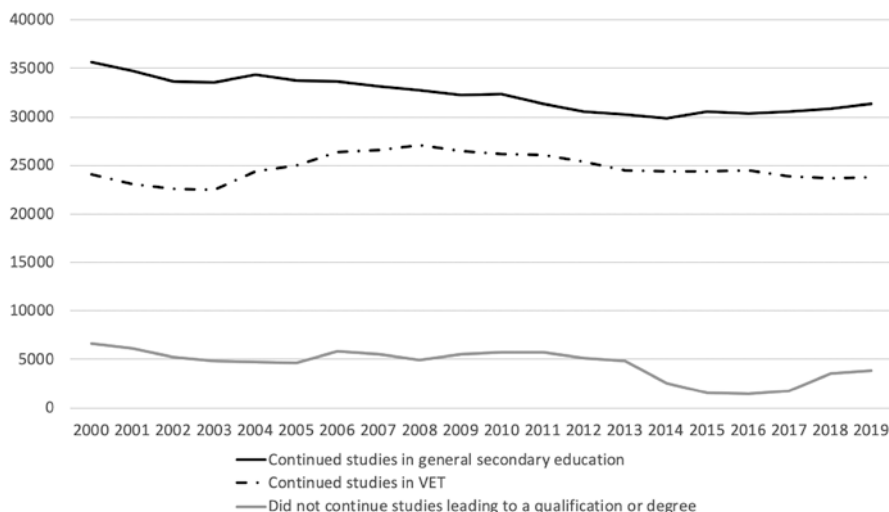


Fig. 8.1 Compulsory school leavers' direct transition to FE 2000–2019 (Official Statistics of Finland, 2020)

VET requires a clear vision of the field (or profession of interest) and provides concrete skills and abilities to gain employment. Overall, studying within the VET system is considered more flexible, relaxed, and less pressurised compared to GEN, and is perceived as a good option for practice-oriented students who learn by doing. Similarly, the Cedefop opinion survey administered through the ReferNet network (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018) indicated that although VET has a positive image, the majority of respondents thought that GEN has a better image.

In the UK, the term ‘parity of esteem’ is used to emphasise the idea that vocational and academic education should be given equal weight (James Relly & Keep, 2020). Based on the law in Finland (Act on Vocational Education and Training 531/2017), the purposes of VET are to increase and maintain vocational competence, promote employment, develop working life and businesses, respond to skills needs, and support lifelong learning and professional growth. Another aim of VET is to support learners’ development into ‘decent, well-rounded and educated’ human beings and members of society who possess the knowledge and skills needed to pursue further education and advance their professional development (Act on Vocational Education and Training 531/2017). While GEN also highlights social inclusion, it emphasises honing student competences, which are especially required in tertiary education (Act on General Upper Secondary Education 714/2018). Overall, the aims of VET emphasise its importance as a means of supporting economic growth and as a vehicle for social inclusion (Nilsson, 2010). Traditionally, Nordic countries have highlighted social inclusion, although it would seem that including all students while simultaneously maintaining the high esteem of VET remains a challenge (Larsen & Persson Thunqvist, 2018). Lappalainen et al. (2019) suggested that the Finnish VET system has increasingly focused on employability

and entrepreneurship in recent decades in addition to meeting the needs of the labour market.

In addition to enrolment, opportunities in the labour market (and FE) may be related to the overall attractiveness of VET. When examining the situation of VET graduates one year after graduation (in 2019), 70% of those with initial vocational qualifications were employed (Official Statistics of Finland, 2019). There were also field-related differences in employment. In particular, 86% of students with an initial vocational qualification in the field of health and welfare were employed, compared to only 43% in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) field, which constituted the lowest rate of employment (Official Statistics of Finland, 2019). In addition, 14% of graduates were unemployed, and 16% continued studying one year after graduation (Official Statistics of Finland, 2019).

All vocational qualifications have provided general eligibility for further studies since 1998. To achieve general eligibility for higher education, VET was reformed during the 1990s and 2000s. More general orientation and subjects were added to curricula, all initial vocational education programs were extended to 3 years in all fields (previously 2–3 years), and compulsory and systematically organised on-the-job learning periods (minimum of 6 months during studies) were introduced in all study programs (Virolainen & Stenström, 2015; Virtanen & Tynjälä, 2008). Based on the OECD's PISA and PIAAC data, Green and Pensiero (2016) noted that curricula with core skills and standardisation (in terms of programme duration) could promote a relative parity of esteem amongst different educational tracks. Interestingly, a recent Finnish study (Ollikainen & Karhunen, 2021) found that general eligibility has had no long-term impact on enrolment in HE or labour market outcomes. Instead, it may have increased the probability of VET students dropping out. In the Swedish context, Hall (2016) similarly concluded that longer programmes and increased general content may actually lead to higher dropout rates, especially among male students.

The Finnish HE system includes academic research universities and universities of applied sciences (UAS, which were established in the 1990s) to create more practice-oriented options within HE (Haltia et al., 2021; Stenström & Virolainen, 2016). The Government Programme (Finnish Government, 2019) and visions set for education have emphasised that the share of higher education graduates should be increased by 2030 to ensure that 50% of the age cohort completes a higher education degree.

When examining the pathways from vocational education to HE in 2017, 30% of new students in UAS had only a vocational qualification, with no matriculation examination of general upper secondary education (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019a). In comparison, the number of entrants to traditional universities with VET backgrounds and only possessing a vocational qualification was very limited; in 2017, 3% of new students in universities had only a vocational qualification (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019a). The reasons for not continuing into HE (especially universities) may be related to various factors, such as the admission system favouring GEN, inadequate and biased guidance towards employment (or UAS), or simply a lack of awareness of the criteria for eligibility (Finnish national

union for students, 2018, p. 68). Moreover, it would appear that students without a matriculation examination from the upper secondary GEN take a longer study path to HE, with more vocationally oriented institutions (such as UAS) being the first step toward HE (Haltia et al., 2021). Regarding the permeability of learning pathways to HE, it has been suggested that the division between academic GEN and vocational education is a predominant feature of both upper secondary education (VET and GEN) and HE (UAS and universities) in Finland (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015).

As a further comparison between VET and GEN pathways, Figure 8.2 shows that the number of older VET students (aged >19 years) has increased over the years, highlighting the importance of VET being a part of lifelong learning in Finland. In 2019, 60% of new students were aged over 25 years (Official Statistics of Finland, 2020). In particular, this figure provides an overview of the starting and overall rates of upper secondary-level education between 2004 and 2018, which emphasises the growing number of VET students compared to GEN students. Furthermore, two trends have emerged in the number of VET students registered over the last 15 years: there was a lower average number of VET students in the first time period (2004–2012, $M = 231374.3$, $SD = 15786.021$) compared to the second period (2013–2018, $M = 290266.0$, $SD = 6218.355$). This step increment of approximately 40,000 VET students from 2012 to 2013 can be explained by changes in the compilation of statistics. Prior to 2013, data on the number of students in school-based VET were only collected on a specific day (20 September) instead of the entire calendar year (see Official Statistics of Finland, 2013).

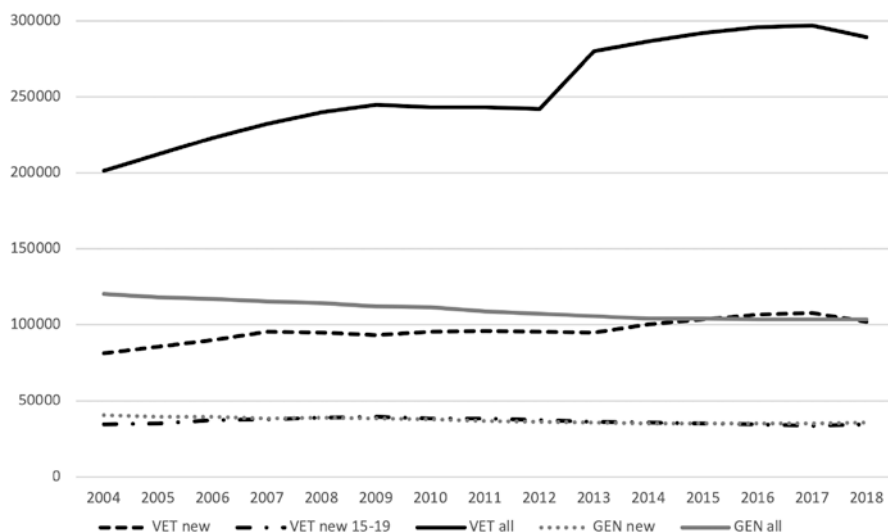


Fig. 8.2 Finnish secondary-level education: Starting and overall rates from 2004 to 2018. (Education Statistics Finland, 2021a, b).

Recent Reforms and Policy Directions Related to VET

In recent years, multiple reforms have been enacted in the Finnish education system. In this chapter, three reforms related to VET are briefly introduced and subsequently discussed in relation to the standing of VET in the country. Notably, the actual impacts of these reforms remain unknown.

The reform of vocational upper secondary education came into force in January 2018. This was implemented partly due to the depleted financial resources for education and highlighted the need to respond to changes occurring in working life and to meet future competence requirements more swiftly (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021b). The reform emphasised competence-based, customer-oriented, and demand-driven approaches. In practice, the reform promoted flexibility and individual study paths with the help of personal competence development plans (PCDPs), whereby study time (and pace) can be flexible and vocational education can be completed in school- or work-based modes of learning. Work-based modes of learning include apprenticeship training (i.e., on an employment contract and including a wage in compliance with the applicable collective agreement for the student) and training based on an agreement (i.e., no wage or other compensation for the student). The flexibility of the VET system includes that no minimum or maximum amount is set for work-based learning. Furthermore, these modes of work-based learning can be flexibly combined during studies, such as in different qualification units.

From the perspective of VET providers (private providers, municipalities, and joint municipal authorities), the reform removed any boundaries between education for youth and adults by combining previous laws under one legislation. Simultaneously, the provision of education, funding, and steering systems emerged. Owing to the reform, VET providers had more local autonomy in directing their educational offerings. From the perspective of funding, prior to the reform, the amount of funding was related to the number of student years annually, which promoted longer study durations. In the newly reformed funding system (see Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019b), the focus shifted toward performance-based funding (completed qualifications and competence points of qualification units) and effectiveness-based funding (related to access to employment and further studies).

To support access to employment and further studies and to ensure that every young person completed upper secondary education, the extension of compulsory education (which came into force in August 2021) raised the minimum school leaving age to 18 years (see Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021c). Thus, compulsory school leavers are now obliged to apply for further studies, and compulsory education is extended until a student either obtains an upper secondary level qualification or turns 18 years old. Apart from the previously mandated free education and daily meals, students are now provided with computers, textbooks, and other learning materials, in addition to equipment and outfits required in instruction.

The ongoing parliamentary reform of continuous learning (to be completed by March 2023) focuses on skills development for the working-age population (see

Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021d). The measures included in the reform are related to increasing opportunities for retraining, providing flexible opportunities to study in HE, and developing study leave and financial aid for adult students. Simultaneously, new ways of recognising informal and nonformal learning are also being identified. In the VET system, the focus of the reform is mainly on underrepresented groups (such as immigrants and adults with weak basic skills) and on lowering their threshold for participation in VET. Here, emphasis is placed on smaller units of qualifications (instead of whole qualifications) and on vocational studies that are offered in conjunction with training that promotes generic and language skills (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021e).

Expert Views on the Standing of VET in Finland

To enrich current perspectives on the standing of VET and to determine directions for its development, expert views were collected during spring 2021 using a Delphi study (e.g., Brady, 2015). Invitations to participate in the survey were sent to 20 individuals who were considered experts in the field of VET. The aims of the purposive sampling were to reach stakeholders who could provide various perspectives on VET and to ensure that the voices of students, teachers and education experts, education providers, and employee/employer organisations and business life were heard. In total, 13 experts representing the various stakeholder groups volunteered to participate in the study.

In the first round of the questionnaire, the experts were asked to confirm their consent to participate anonymously in the study and provide some background information. They were then asked to answer the following open-ended questions: (1) How do you see the standing and status of VET at the moment? (2) How would you evaluate the recent reforms in relation to the standing and status of VET, and (3) according to your opinion, what types of action can promote the standing and status of VET now and in the future? In these questions, ‘standing’ referred to the position of VET in the education system, while ‘status’ referred to the esteem and value of VET.

A total of 10 experts (7 female and 3 male) who had years of experience in VET ($M = 10$, $SD = 7.2$) answered the first-round questionnaire. The received answers related to the standing of VET and the actions needed to promote VET were summarised via thematic analysis (e.g., Terry et al., 2017). To build consensus on the standing of VET, a summary of these first-round results was sent to experts to allow them to comment on their views and add insights regarding the summary.

In addition to the summary, statements relating to the standing and status of VET were added to the second round of the questionnaire, which was partly based on the answers received during the first round of the survey. The experts were asked to rate each statement according to its probability (from 1 = ‘*very improbable*’ to 5 = ‘*very probable*’) and desirability (from 1 = ‘*very undesirable*’ to 5 = ‘*very desirable*’). In addition, they were provided with an opportunity to comment on their views. Only

six experts answered the second round of the questionnaire, which should be noted when interpreting the findings.

Perspectives on the Standing and Status of VET

In this section, the standing of VET in Finland is further described based on the experts' views. The themes presented below highlight how the position of VET was experienced internationally, within the education system, in relation to its purposes, and amongst the key stakeholders.

Finnish VET Has a Good International Status Two of the experts noted that Finnish VET has relatively good status and specific strengths (compared to its international counterparts). These strengths included flexibility, cooperation with the labour market, and an inclusive and integrated approach in relation to skills development for the whole working age population. The experts noted that these strengths were highlighted during the current pandemic, where VET was able to remain relatively responsive and functional owing to its flexible organisation in different learning environments.

General and Higher Education Have a Higher Standing Within the Education System The experts noted that VET has a solid and established standing in the education system. In particular, two of the experts underlined that the standing of VET has improved. Nevertheless, the experts also recognised that undermining and even negative attitudes toward VET remain, with six experts referring to the media and public discussion as sources of the negative image. The experts thought that VET was not depicted in a balanced way by the media or in public discussions. Instead, it is often viewed from a negative perspective that highlights the challenges. Such negative framing was considered to impact the image of VET, as individual accounts from students, parents, or teachers are generalised to represent the entire field of VET. Concerning compulsory school leavers, the experts noted that young people may have a more positive attitude toward VET compared to their parents or career counsellors. In fact, half of the experts cited problems related to general attitudes, levels of parental education, or biased career guidance. As one expert stated, '[I]t is highly questioned why a young person who could cope in general education would like to choose VET'. Others mentioned that this challenge may be more visible in urban areas and may have been worsened by a 'youth guarantee' scheme to tackle youth unemployment.

Five of the experts discussed the standing of VET in relation to working life and employment, emphasising that skilled and qualified workers provided by VET are needed by the labour market. However, they also remarked that there were field-related differences. For example, some vocational fields are not attractive for highly motivated students, and choosing the VET pathway may imply lower wage premiums and weaker career prospects compared to choosing GEN.

The standing of VET in relation to raising the level of education and competences was discussed by five experts, who acknowledged the expectation that an increasing number of VET graduates should obtain HE qualifications. Nevertheless, they also mentioned that the VET pathway towards HE is weakly supported, with more resources being allocated directly to HE. Their opinions further highlighted the presence of unnecessary boundaries between upper secondary VET and HE. This manifests in the rigid separation of upper secondary level specialist vocational qualifications (EQF Level 5, ISCED 4) from HE qualifications instead of considering them from the perspective of the competence levels achieved. In the HE system, the important role of UAS in promoting vocational and professional skills was emphasised. However, further pathways from UAS qualifications to master's degrees and doctoral studies in research universities were considered inflexible.

The VET System Places a Greater Focus on Youth Education Although the recently enacted law on VET abolished the boundaries between youth and adult education, four experts noted that the separation between them remains visible when discussing the standing and status of VET. One expert described how 'the standing and status of VET is largely based on how it manages in educating compulsory school leavers. Although the volume of adult education is higher, it is not similarly highlighted as youth education'. This was also considered to manifest in public discussions on youth education and related challenges. The experts described how VET is most often perceived as a direct continuation of compulsory education. They also expressed that competence development within the VET system (in the form of qualification units or as further and specialist vocational qualifications) is not as visible as it should be compared to initial vocational qualifications. Nevertheless, the contextualised nature of VET was also noted, as some specialist vocational qualifications were considered highly popular. On the whole, it was expected that due to changes in skills needs, there would be an increased requirement for further training and the reskilling and upskilling of adults, although youth education is also highlighted.

VET Has a Good Standing Amongst VET Stakeholders When considering the perspectives of the education system, the world of work, and students choosing VET, it was highlighted that young people who had chosen VET were satisfied with their choices. When considering VET providers and their cooperation with working life, the need to respond to changes was considered both essential and difficult. Although an important aim was to build partnerships, it was noted that the flexible opportunities provided by the reform were not recognised in workplaces. In addition, negative publicity and public discussion focused on problems and budget cuts, which were considered detrimental to the standing of VET in the world of work.

In the second-round questionnaire, statements related to VET in the Finnish education system were used to collect further information related to the standing of VET ('In 2031, VET in Finland...'). The experts were asked to rate the probability and desirability of the statement from their perspectives. They were unanimous and rated the desire that VET '...is publicly valued (media, papers)', '...is, in

comparison to general education, an equal pathway also for high-achieving students', and '...is as valued as general education' the highest. However, the experts did not fully agree on the probability of these future projections, as they were considered both probable and quite neutral. In the additional comments, the experts suggested that the status of VET would continue to improve as the number of parents with UAS degrees increased. Moreover, the experts commented that comparisons with GEN were not meaningful, as this did not sufficiently acknowledge the role of VET and adult students.

Perspectives on Current Reforms and Developments

In this section, expert views on the current reforms are briefly summarised. According to the experts, the reform of vocational upper secondary education both improved and worsened the image of VET. They described the 'forward-looking' reform as much needed and having the potential to promote the standing of VET in the country. However, based on their views, negative public discussions tend to hamper the achievement of this goal. One expert further noted that the reform and its highlighting of work-based learning may have increased the gap between VET and GEN. Nevertheless, the experts believed that the reform enhanced the system's flexibility and individuality, which could also serve the needs of those already in the labour market more effectively.

The experts also noted that because the implementation of the reform is still in progress, VET providers may be at different stages in the implementation process. Furthermore, it was suggested that full implementation of the reform would require changes in the culture and pedagogical practices. Many of the experts emphasised that implementation of the reform suffered from simultaneous budget cuts in VET. As a result, many problems related to depleted resources have been falsely perceived as an impact of the reform.

Meanwhile, the extension of compulsory education was experienced as emphasising the role of VET in social inclusion instead of increasing and maintaining vocational competence and lifelong learning. Moreover, the reform was considered to possibly have negative and positive impacts on the standing of VET. On the one hand, if the reform forces young people to study in VET without any basic skills or real interest, it may have negative impacts. On the other hand, the reform may promote the accessibility of education and encourage young people to choose their field of vocation more freely, especially since the education (and resources such as tools) are provided free.

In terms of reforming continuous learning, the experts suggested that the role of VET in lifelong learning systems is neither recognised nor widely discussed. They even thought that this could diminish the standing of VET, as this role is not often acknowledged in its development. One expert noted that improvements in continuous learning could support further implementation of the VET reform by encouraging the use of qualification units and smaller parts of the qualification.

In the second-round questionnaire, the experts unanimously rated the future projection ‘[I]n 2031, VET implements individual study paths with high quality and success’ as both very probable and very desirable. With respect to the recent reform of compulsory education, the state ‘...the extension of compulsory education has weakened the status of VET, as it is considered more strongly as a responsibility than choice’ was considered undesirable. However, this garnered the most varying views on probability, as the experts considered it both improbable and probable. When considering VET from the perspective of lifelong learning, the experts unanimously expressed the opinion that it is probable (or very probable) and desirable (or very desirable) that VET ‘...breaks the boundaries between upper secondary education and HE with flexible study modules’ and ‘...is a valued part of the lifelong learning system’. Furthermore, a few experts mentioned in their additional comments that the role of lifelong learning is expected to stand out in the future as the world, professions, and careers undergo changes.

Further Perspectives on Future Directions

As part of the first and second rounds of the questionnaire, experts could suggest actions and measures to promote the standing of VET. The experts especially highlighted two wider directions: a focus on the quality of VET and the need for stable funding.

Promoting Long-Term Development and Focusing on Quality The experts thought that the continuous changes were burdensome, and there was a need to focus on implementing the changes introduced. The experts viewed education politics as short-term; currently, from their experiences, support for the implementation of the VET reform had diminished due to the change of government. As one expert mentioned, ‘long-term development actions aiming at developing the quality of VET are in the key position’, while according to another expert, ‘it all starts with the high-quality VET—it is the best way to make VET attractive’.

Nevertheless, it would appear that what constitutes high-quality VET varies depending on the considered aim. The experts mentioned the following directions for further development:

- Focus more on generic skills and general content in youth education to support pathways to HE.
- Place greater emphasis on adult education and showcasing its role as part of VET.
- Enhance the implementation of individual study paths and flexibility (especially in adult education).
- Foster work-based learning and collaboration between education and the world of work to ensure that VET responds to the needs of employers and that teaching and guidance are up-to-date and of high quality.

The Need for Stable VET Funding Instead of carrying out development activities as projects, the experts highlighted the role of stable funding given that current funding was considered fragmentary. Six experts mentioned the need to develop a funding system that provides sufficient resources and is more foreseeable for VET providers. One expert described how VET stakeholders can develop high-quality VET, although policymakers should ensure sufficient economic operating conditions. They also mentioned that more resources should be directed toward teaching, student welfare services, and youth work. Unfortunately, the experts thought it unlikely that the Finnish government would add more resources into VET, as the youth population is in decline. In the future, this is expected to further influence the structure of VET providers.

In the second-round questionnaire, there were variations in expert views when assessing the future projections ‘[I]n 2031...emphasis on work-based learning has distanced VET from general education and improved the attractiveness of VET’ and ‘...adding general content and common units promoting generic skills has improved the attractiveness of VET’. The probability and desirability of these futures varied from neutral to very probable and desirable. In the additional comments, the experts further emphasised that VET has its own role and aims in the education system; hence, it should be developed from this perspective instead of rendering it more like general education. In addition, it was unanimously considered very desirable that ‘...VET is sufficiently and steadily financed’, although this was not considered very probable.

Finding a Balance Among the Different Aims

The aims of this chapter were to determine the standing of VET in Finland and to identify recent and future directions that could improve its standing and status in both the education system and (more widely) within society. Based on statistical data and enrolments, VET has found its foothold next to GEN. However, the experts emphasised that comparisons between VET and GEN may not be meaningful, as VET has its own purpose and aims within the education system. Moreover, as VET in Finland is largely centred on adult education, considering VET as youth education next to GEN does not provide a full picture of its standing. This finding supports the view that ‘parity of esteem’ in Finland may not be suitable for describing VET in comparison to other education options or even sought after (cf. James Relly & Keep, 2020).

Diminishing the boundaries between GEN and VET is highlighted as an important policy goal in Finland (see Finnish Government, 2021). In this study, the experts expressed a need for the long-term development of high-quality VET, with a focus on generic skills and general content in youth education, which would support further learning pathways more effectively. However, they also expressed the need to enhance work-based learning and foster collaboration between education and the

world of work. These directions may divide opinions and may be difficult to combine. However, at the EU policy level, VET is also expected to promote the permeability of learning pathways to higher education and to establish closer links with the world of work (European Commission, 2016). As a solution to this dilemma, education policy in Finland has highlighted the need for individual and flexible study paths.

Responding to the various individual, social, and economic aims is not without challenges. In addition, within the publicly funded education system, directing funding may be linked to prioritising aims and target groups. In addition to the current focus on youth education and fostering social aims, the experts suggested that more emphasis is needed on adult education and further vocational education, also from the perspective of funding. This finding suggests that highlighting social inclusion may be negatively linked to the status of VET, which was also revealed in a previous Nordic study (Larsen & Persson Thunqvist, 2018). Therefore, in this chapter, it is suggested that more discussion is required on the purposes of VET and the measures to support those purposes.

This work may support development activities by making the different target groups, aims, and stakeholder views more visible. However, this study has several limitations that should be noted when interpreting the findings. The Delphi study with experts was small-scale, based on purposive sampling, and was conducted anonymously. This anonymous implementation meant that the positions and perspectives of the eventual participants were not revealed, which undoubtedly limits interpretations of the findings. Although implementing the Delphi study did not provide a comprehensive account of the standing of VET from various stakeholder perspectives, the aims were to complement the statistics and introduce more current views related to the standing of VET. It should be acknowledged that education and policy preferences are often related to individuals' own experiences, priorities, and positions (Busemeyer & Garritzmann, 2017; Russo et al., 2019). The analysis of the expert views was supported by returning the summary of the standing of VET to the experts to check for accuracy and resonance with their views. Finally, as noted by the experts, the reforms have only recently been implemented, meaning their impact on VET (or its standing) remains to be seen.

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