

【寄稿論文】

The Changing Role of General Studies and Work-based Learning in Vocational Education and Training (VET)—the case of Finland—

Maarit Hannele Virolainen (University of Jyväskylä, Finnish Institute for Educational Research)

Abstract : The importance of general studies as part of vocational education and training (VET) has been recognised since the 1900s. When VET was incorporated as part of the overall education system in the Nordic countries, the role of more generic studies in study programmes was redefined. In Finland, there has been a transition from the bureaucratic education model towards a more individualised organisation of VET. The aim of this article is to explore how the role of general and work-based studies has been redefined in Finnish VET since the 1990s. The study is based on a secondary analysis of previous research and governmental documents. It aims to increase the understanding of the challenges and discrepancies of developing VET as part of the education system when interests, such as the promotion of civic education, individual progress through open educational pathways, continuous learning and employability, are confluent.

Key Words: Key words: vocational education and training, upper secondary education, reform

Introduction: The education system and societal change

In Finland, as in the other Nordic countries, general subject studies were considered important components of workers' education as early as the 19th century. Sunday schools were established at the beginning of the 19th century, following the examples of other Nordic countries (Stenström & Virolainen, 2018a). Each town was expected to put up a Sunday school based on a decree given in the mid-1850s (Klemelä, 1999; Stenström & Virolainen, 2018a.) The education provided by these Sunday schools focused on teaching reading, writing, numeracy and the Christian religion, and it was directed to apprentices and novice professionals. These schools were later seen as the predecessors of vocational school-based education (Klemelä, 1999; Tuomisto, 1986).

At the time, the opportunity for education was a privilege available to only a minority of the population. Since then, the education system has been developed to address all age groups and cater to all citizens (Heikkinen, 2001). The composition of the education system, its educational routes and the relation of general studies within and between education programmes have all been rebuilt several times to achieve a good balance between education, the state economy and society. Overall societal and cultural changes, including reforms in the labour market and urbanisation, have increasingly called into question the purpose and organisation of various kinds of complementary

education provisions in the 21st century (Brown & Lauder, 1991).

Educational sociologists have characterised the period of education transformation parallel to the First Industrial Revolution and its labour market as a shift towards *bureaucratic education* (Brown & Lauder, 1991). In general, in Western societies, the comprehensive education system expanded during the beginning of the 20th century. The establishment of comprehensive education was followed by the increased need to educate trained and motivated labour forces for industrialised societies, especially after the Second World War. For this purpose, each Nordic country adopted a strategy of its own in developing vocational education and training (VET) (Michelsen & Stenström, 2018).

The bureaucratic education system, as described by Brown and Lauder (1991), was developed to meet these demands following the expansion of the bureaucratic organisation model as a major form of social organisation in the 20th century. The need to reorganise education in order to meet the needs of societies transforming from agricultural to industrialised increased when various functions of modernised society developed and differentiated into specialised forms of organisation and service provision. Parallel to this societal transformation emerged a need to create a formal system for the *socialisation* and *selection* of citizens to further and higher education, as well as for new emerging societal positions when nation states and their cities expanded. In accordance with this, a VET

system was developed. This new system was expected to provide the skills needed in delivering services, such as nursing, day care and public administration, and in producing goods and their logistics in the national welfare states (Henriksson et al., 2006). The expanding VET system undertook the education tasks which were earlier taken care of by guilds' craftsmen and families (Stenström & Virolainen, 2018a). Thus, the education of citizens and workers was systematised, and the assessment of their skills and competencies became more standardised. The education system screened and assessed students and provided them with credentials and qualifications which employers could use for selecting the workforce. Bureaucratic education relied on certifying the abilities of individuals and giving them merits based on their achievements; i.e., it was based on the idea of *meritocracy* (Brown & Lauder, 1991).

The ideal of bureaucratic education was targeted to fight 'personal subjugation, nepotism and subjective judgment' and to legitimate the societal transformation and selection of individuals to new emerging occupational positions (Brown & Lauder, 1991, p. 6). The bureaucratic education system was expected to fulfil its role logically; lower education was directed to lower positions in society and the labour market, whereas higher education was directed to higher positions. At the same time, education disciplined individuals into new frameworks, concepts and understandings, environments for working and methods of learning. Proper learning itself was seen to take place at schools by the book and to follow timetables, which was different from people's former habitual agricultural lives. Punctuality and following timetables enabled *bureaucratic machines to work*, and the knowledge found essential by school administrators was chosen to construct the basis for curricula. The contents to be learnt were divided following the same bureaucratic logic; knowledge was divided into subjects which were learnt in designated units of time. The allocation of time to various subjects taught at school became an object of negotiation, as numbers of lessons and courses were divided between various subject teachers in comprehensive education, upper secondary education and higher education. Teachers specialised in subjects of their own (Brown & Lauder, 1991). The designed vocational qualifications guaranteed the quality of learning

and the educational levels achieved by individuals. The completed credentials and grades gained in various school subjects and average grades enabled the allocation of students to various educational routes and life chances.

Towards the late 20th century, the Information Age and the related post-Fordist production model, lean production and information capitalism replaced the former dominant bureaucratic approach of social organisation (Castells, 1997). The increased share of the population with higher education qualifications was seen as a means to meet the demands of the labour market at the time of the Knowledge Society (Scott, 1995; Välimaa & Hoffman, 2008). Eventually, when the population achieved a higher level of education because of the expanded provision, the meaning of education and higher education degrees was undermined by the emergent new problem. Despite the long-term observation in the school context and the testing of students' skills and competencies, as well as their assessment, the certificates given about completed qualifications gave a rather limited amount of information about graduates for the needs of employers. These did not guarantee the match of graduated students' competencies with the demand in the labour market (Brown et al., 2008). As a result, employers increasingly started to look for employees' characteristics beyond the qualifications and degrees they had achieved, demanding *suitability*. Furthermore, the quest for efficiency and firms' need to avoid failures in recruitment contributed to the emergence of a new profession, i.e. human resource managers, who could utilise psychologists to consult in their selection practices and procedures (Lievens & Chapman, 2019). Combined with other societal and cultural changes, education systems lost some of their taken-for-granted legitimacy and prestige in allocating graduates to future positions in the labour market. The role of VET and higher education in society continued to change.

In the 21st century, Digital Taylorism has emerged as an important mode of production. Furthermore, the emergence of surveillance capitalism has been considered the latest change in the information society (Zuboff, 1985; Zuboff, 2019). In general, the latest industrial revolution, called Manufacturing 4.0, has been expected to increase the need for re-skilling among the adult population (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019). Changes in the

labour market have contributed to the ageing of knowledge, skills and competencies and have enhanced the demand for continuous learning opportunities (OECD, 2020). In Finland, the change has been reflected in the shift in educational rhetoric from lifelong learning to continuous learning (Lemmetty & Collin, 2022). Altogether, these changes have increased the demand for a better understanding of the meaning of general studies and generic skills in VET. Likewise, the need for VET to provide transversal skills has been acknowledged (Care & Luo, 2016).

On the whole, education systems have responded to external shocks and demands for efficacy and adaptation to labour market changes by modifying curricula, developing qualification structures and digital pedagogy, and introducing processes for managerial quality (Cedefop, 2022). In the following section, the changes adopted in Finnish vocational upper secondary education and training are presented. The focus of the discussion is the perspective of how the role and position of general and work-based studies have changed in vocational qualifications since the 1990s. Major reforms are introduced to understand how the VET system has adapted to societal changes.

Reconciliation of general and work-based studies in Finnish VET qualifications

The purpose of this section is to increase the understanding of how the relations between general studies and work-based learning have changed in Finnish vocational upper secondary education since the 1990s. Since the 1990s, some of the major discussions in education policy concerning Finnish VET have addressed access to further and higher education via VET, development of work-based learning to enhance practical learning and compliance with the demands of the labour market and development of the qualification structure.

The role of general and vocational studies in the curricula has been transformed, while the vocational education system and the education system in general have been developed. In the following, the major transformations in vocational education are described to increase the understanding of how the reconciliation between general and vocational studies, including work-based learning, has been embedded in these

broader systemic changes. Among such changes, the role of VET in the education system has been transformed, and eligibility to higher education has become more important since the late 1990s (Laukia, 2013, p. 285; Nylund & Virolainen, 2019; Stenström & Virolainen, 2018b). This transformation has enhanced the demand for general subject skills, for example, the command of mathematics and languages. Furthermore, the transformations have concerned the reorganisation of the relations between youth and adult vocational education. The reforms have aimed to increase the efficiency of organising VET and enabling continued education. Efforts to realign the VET system have been further legitimised by the diminishing age cohorts and increasing elderly population in a country with a relatively small population (5,565,519 inhabitants as of December 2022; Official Statistics of Finland, 2022).

The transforming relations between IVET and CVET

At the beginning of the 1990s, the roles of initial vocational education and training (IVET) providers and continuing vocational education (CVET) providers in Finland were separate. Initial vocational education and training qualifications targeted those who had no previous vocational qualifications in the occupational field. They were mostly taken by young people, aged 15–19 years, but also by reskilling-oriented adults. Continuing vocational education targeted those who already had vocational qualifications and wanted to continue their education. They were taken by the population over 19 years old, who already had work experience. In the late 1990s, separate acts and regulations directed the organisation of IVET and CVET. The Vocational Education Act, which stipulated IVET provided for both youth and adults, was enacted in 1998 (Laki ammatillisesta koulutuksesta 630/1998). The Adult Education Act stipulated *competence-based education* (Laki ammatillisesta aikuiskoulutuksesta 631/1998). The competence-based qualification (CBQ) system was established to serve the needs of adults who wanted to have their informal learning and skills gained from the world of work acknowledged and certificated (Stenström &

Virolainen, 2018b). It enabled taking initial vocational qualifications, further vocational qualifications and specialist vocational qualifications, as well as the provision of education preparing students for competence-based assessment by vocational institutes.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, several major reforms have been introduced in which the relations of IVET, CVET and work-based learning have been redefined and realigned in Finland. These major reforms are described in the following sections (A–E).

A) Establishment of the competence-based qualification system for adults in 1994 and skills demonstrations in IVET in 2005

The introduction of the CBQ system in 1994 addressed the recognition of adults' competencies achieved at any place (Lahtinen et al., 2006; Stenström & Virolainen, 2018b). According to the decrees given for the CBQ system, the length and forms of preparatory education for the qualifications were not formally stipulated by acts or decrees. Providers of adult VET could decide about preparatory education and offer it based on national qualification requirements (Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland, 2002). The skills of adult learners were assessed in skills demonstrations. The former separate act, which had been governing *apprenticeship training*, was abolished, and the decrees governing it were embedded in the acts stipulating youth and adult VET in 1998 (Laki ammatillisesta koulutuksesta 630/1998 [Law on vocational education], Laki ammatillisesta aikuiskoulutuksesta [Law on vocational adult education] 631/1998, Kivinen & Peltomäki, 1999; Lahtinen et al., 2006).

Later, the skills demonstrations model developed for assessment in the CBQ system was also adapted as a form of assessment in IVET. The introduction of skills demonstrations in IVET increased the emphasis given to vocational skills and work-based learning in vocational upper secondary qualifications (Haltia, 2006; Räisänen

& Rökköläinen, 2014; Rökköläinen, 2011; Stenström et al., 2006; Virtanen, 2013). They were developed through several pilots, supported by the European Social Research Fund (Rökköläinen, 2011; Vehviläinen, 2004). The skills demonstrations were made part of each vocational qualification module. Legislation for this new approach to assessment in IVET was not given until 2005 (Anttila et al., 2010; Haapakorpi, 2007; Rökköläinen, 2011, pp. 32–33).

B) Alignment of youth's and adults' national qualification requirements in 2008–2009

In 2008–2009, the national qualification requirements for VET were unified so that the new national qualification requirements included both the initial vocational qualifications requirements (opetusuunnitelmaperusteinen ammatillinen koulutus in Finnish) and the qualification requirements for CBQs (näyttötutkinnot in Finnish; Ammatillisen tutkintojärjestelmän kehittämishankkeen [TUTKE] ohjausryhmä, 2010, p. 21).

In practice, this change meant that the qualification requirements for youth and adult education became the same. This shift also increased the role of using the assessment approach developed for the CBQs for vocational skills demonstrations in youth education (Haltia, 2006; Stenström et al., 2006). The adaptation of vocational skills demonstrations as part of IVET for youth benefitted from the experience gained when introducing a CBQ system for adults (Poikela & Rökköläinen, 2006; Räisänen & Rökköläinen, 2014; Rökköläinen, 2011; Virtanen, 2013).

C) The VET reform of 2015–2018 and unified legislation for IVET and CVET

The latest reform of the VET system has sometimes been called the most fundamental reform of the education system in Finland since the 2010s. In this reform, the legislation for youth and adult vocational education was unified, and former separate legislations were abolished; that is, the

separate CBQ system for adults was abolished in 2018 (Vocational Education and Training Act 531/2017, i.e. Laki ammatillisesta koulutuksesta 531/2017).

The reform meant that the overall regulation of VET decreased. The purpose of the reform was to enable more flexibility for both education providers and learners. Work-based learning could also be organised in more diverse ways, and a student's qualification could combine a training agreement and apprenticeship or include either of them (Nokelainen, 2019; Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020; Tapani et al., 2019). The idea behind the reform was to enable individual study plans based on students' existing competencies and their accreditations. Furthermore, an individualised length of studies was allowed for students based on their individual progress in studies.

The reasons given for this reform and for reorganising the relations between IVET and CVET can be identified as both internal and external to the education system. The 2015–2018 reform concerned state administration, regulation and the organisation of VET regionally (Virolainen, 2018). According to public documents, the primary goals of the reform were to enhance the meaning of VET in society and to renew the funding and qualification structure while sustaining eligibility for higher education (Bill: HE 39/2017). The legitimatisation given for the reform included taking care of the regional needs of education and enhancing collaboration between education and the world of work. The overlapping educational provisions and borders between youth and adult education also had to be removed. As part of the reform, the supervision and funding of unified forms of VET were organised into a new unit under the Ministry of Education and Culture. System efficiency and increased workplace learning were set as important goals (Bill: HE 39/2017).

The need to pay attention to European educational cooperation was already brought up by a working group set up by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2010 (Ammatillisen

tutkintojärjestelmän kehittämishankkeen TUTKE ohjausryhmä, 2010). In the bill for the new legislation, European cooperation, the European qualification framework, the European credit system for vocational education and training, the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET and Europass were brought up together with the New Skills Agenda established by the European Commission in 2016 (Bill: HE 39/2017). Also, many other reasons given for the 2015–2018 reform were brought up by the working group created by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2010 (Ammatillisen tutkintojärjestelmän kehittämishankkeen TUTKE ohjausryhmä, 2010). These included diminishing age cohorts, diversifying groups of learners, urbanisation and changes in the labour market resulting from emerging new technologies and related development of work processes, as well as the emergence of new occupational profiles. It can be seen from the working group's views that the need to change the VET system had been recognised for a decade, but building consensus for the reformative approach had proven challenging.

In sum, the reasons behind the 2018 reform were both external, i.e. derived from overall societal change, and internal to the education system, recognised as the outcomes of the fragmentary, partial development of various parts of the VET system. The internal drivers demanding the reorganisation of the VET system included overlapping qualifications. The inadequate coordination of initiatives for developing and providing new qualifications resulted in a somewhat unclear structure of the entire VET qualification system over the last decades. The qualifications had overlapping study units, and some qualifications were seen as too specific and narrow with respect to the career opportunities available in the labour market (TUTKE ohjausryhmä, 2010).

D) Prolongation of compulsory education until the age of 18 (Act on Compulsory Education 1214/2020 [in Finnish, Oppivelvollisuuslaki

1214/2020)).

In Finland, the unified compulsory education system was established in 1968 and was implemented throughout the country from 1972 to 1977 (Pekkarinen & Uusitalo, 2012). It provided all citizens with free compulsory education for nine years. It was directed at individuals aged 7–16 years.

The prolongation of compulsory education until the age of 18 was adopted into law in 2020. This meant that young individuals have the right and obligation to complete upper secondary education, either general upper secondary education (*lukio*) or vocational upper secondary studies for free, and continue their studies until the age of 18 or until they have completed the upper secondary qualification. Prior to the reform, students had to pay for their books and other learning materials, as well as their examination fees, in general upper secondary education. Furthermore, students who have to move away from their parents in order to study have the right to a housing allowance. The reform is expected to increase participation in upper secondary education and improve the employability of young people.

E) The reform of continuous learning in the 2020s.

The reform of continuous learning was part of the present government's programme (Bill [HE 76/2021]; Service Centre for Continuous Learning and Employment Act 682/2021; Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland, 2020; OECD, 2020). Administratively, a major element of this reform was the establishment of the Service Centre for Continuous Learning. The idea was expressed by a working group that had compared several countries' efforts to adapt and organise continuous learning (Oosi et al., 2019). The new centre has been targeted to integrate adults' competence development more firmly with the needs of the world of work and regional development. The established centre is an independent sub-unit within the National Agency for Education,

administered and guided by the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment in Finland (The Act for the Parliament about the Service Centre for Continuous Learning 682/2021; Bill for the Parliament about the Service Centre for Continuous Learning and Employment Act and some related acts 76/2021).

According to the aforementioned Bill, the main goal for establishing the new centre is to integrate services for continuous learning and employment. The key challenge addressed by the establishment of the integrative service centre is the cumulation of participation in education and competencies for those with higher education and employment. Furthermore, there are inadequacies of basic skills among many adults, and the demand for qualification-oriented education among the adult population has been more dominant than taking short training and specialised further education courses.

The challenges explicated in the Bill reflect the findings of the OECD (2020) report on continuous learning in Finland, the findings of The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) studies and the European Commission's report on skills mismatches (Hämäläinen et al., 2017, 2019; Nygren et al., 2020; Vandeplas & Thum-Tysen, 2019). As the provision of adult education in Finland has had an emphasis on the completion of whole qualifications, it has been interpreted as possibly preventing participation in education by some parts of the adult population. Furthermore, the Finnish education system has not had specific structures to support participation in education for adults with weak or low basic skills. For example, skills in the Finnish language have become a topical issue of interest, as the number of immigrants has increased.

Discussion: The role of general and work-based studies in Finnish VET

Since the 1990s, from the perspective of national

qualification requirements, there has been a shift from setting broad goals for learning towards a more competence-based and individualised approach in Finnish VET (Nylund & Virolainen, 2019; Rosenblad et al., 2022). Looking back at the developments in Finnish VET, we can see that the role of general studies within IVET was first enhanced towards the late 1990s. Around 2000, all vocational qualifications were extended to the last three years. From 2000 to 2010, the competence-based approach was also enhanced in youth education following the model of adults' CBQs, and skills demonstrations (later called competence demonstrations) were introduced to qualifications for the young, enabling a more varied assessment of work-based learning. While the competence-based approach has been underlined in the national qualification requirements, education providers have had autonomy in implementing the requirements in pedagogy. Since the 2017–2018 reform of VET, the common components of qualification requirements across occupational fields, i.e. general studies, have also been obligatory for adult students, as adult and youth education are organised under the same legislation. However, adults may have their command of these subjects accredited based on personal competence development plans (Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland, n.d.). The latest VET reform has continued to underline the importance of competence demonstrations given in the workplace. The common components of qualifications (general knowledge and key competencies) can still be assessed through assignments and examinations. Accordingly, the assessment of common studies and vocational studies may differ.

Generic-oriented studies (e.g. competencies in communication and interaction or mathematics and natural sciences) and transversal competencies have been considered important for students' progress to higher education, active citizenship and transition to the world of work (see, e.g. Noack, 2021). Typically, when vocational students continue their studies in higher education in Finland, they do so at universities of applied sciences (Hintsanen et al., 2016). At present, the common qualification components of VET are presented in qualification requirements more from the perspective of transversal skills than was the place in the 1990s (Nylund & Virolainen, 2018; Virolainen, 2022). In the 1990s, the common components were defined from the perspective of

individual subjects in the national qualification requirements for VET, and they were: mother tongue, second domestic language, foreign language, mathematics, civics and work life education, sports and health education and optional studies, which comprised 20 study credits of the whole qualification (ranging between 80–120 study credits, National Board of Education, 1995). In 2022, the common components are defined as competences in communication and interaction, competences in mathematics and natural sciences and social and working life competences, and free choice studies (National Board of Education, Finland, 2022). They comprise 35 competence points of the in total 145 competence points demanded for a qualification.

Overall, it can be concluded that since the 1990s, the importance of general studies in VET for continuous learning has been recognised, but their transforming role has been a source of confusion. Their transformation towards transversal skills has emerged as the education system has matured. Students' command of general subject studies, such as mathematics and foreign languages, is important for their ability to complete qualifications in higher education. At the same time, the role of work-based studies in VET has become more flexible and individualised, as there are many forms of work-based learning that can be taken as part of qualifications (training agreements and/or apprenticeship training). The definition of work-based studies within the latest reform has reflected efforts to keep with the pace of changes in the world of work and to enable a more flexible approach for organising VET. There is a need for investigations about vocational students' study progress and success in higher education and transitions to the world of work, as well as their experiences with personal development, to determine whether systemic changes have succeeded in Finland. In the present Finnish education system, the universities of applied science provide the main route for higher education for those with IVET qualifications. In 2020, around 45% of students in the Universities of applied sciences have previous vocational qualifications (Education Statistics Finland, 2023). Access to the labour market is generally better for those with higher education (over 80% of graduates) and for those with vocational post-compulsory education (60%–70% of graduates) compared with those without post-compulsory education qualifications. At the societal level, the

transformation from the bureaucratic education model towards emergent digitalised ecosystems of learning has increased the demand for individualised guidance and study design, the recognition of prior learning and competencies, and career management skills (see also Virolainen et al., 2022).

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