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THE TRANSFORMATION OF FINNISH VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING: DOCUMENTAL EVIDENCE AND PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS

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SUMMARY

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The aim of the research is to study the transformations of vocational education and training (VET) in Finland after the implementation of the 2018 reform, the most extensive restructuring in education legislation in almost twenty years. Two data collection methods were employed: *a) document analysis* to collect documental evidence from governmental official publications, and *b) semi-structured interviews* to collect qualitative data regarding the perceptions of VET school principals about the successful practices, challenges and future perspectives of VET in Finland. Documental evidence shows that the key dimensions of the new reform are: the strengthening of the cooperation between schools and the world of work, and the individualization of learning paths from a customer-oriented and competence-based perspective a financing system that awards providers’ efficiency and graduates’ employability rates. The results of the qualitative study show that the reform is moving in the expected direction and its effects are gradually becoming more tangible. However, the changes in the economic dimension might entail a challenge for VET providers, although not all of them experience them at the same degree. The social background is increasingly becoming an influential factor for the educational attainment of VET students. Nonetheless, in despite of its relatively disadvantageous position in respect to general upper secondary, VET will remain an attractive and sustainable study path in Finland for the upcoming years, in particular due to the eligibility it provides for higher education studies.

Keywords: *vocational education and training; Amis reform; adult education; secondary level education; vocational qualifications; principals perceptions; workplace learning; working life*



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1. INTRODUCTION

Guaranteeing equal educational opportunities for everyone independently of their ethnic origin, cultural identity, language, gender or socioeconomic status is perhaps the fundamental principle of Finland's educational policy. The country's education system is characterized by its 'no dead ends' structure, which allows individuals to progress throughout the different instruction levels with almost no restrictions. The inherent qualities of the Finnish system – compulsion, gratuity, equity and availability – determine that the majority of students enjoy fairly stable educational trajectories, barely being affected by factors such as previous schooling choice, academic performance or socioeconomic background.

Finland has one of the highest levels of completion of basic education in the world: annually near 98% of students successfully complete their compulsory education: for instance, 56 700 students out of roughly 60 000 enrolled in the ninth grade of comprehensive education were awarded the basic education certificate in 2019 (Statistics Finland, 2019). With the aim of replicating such success into the subsequent levels of instruction, a fundamental goal of Finnish educational policy is to ensure that every student completes at least the secondary level of education or a secondary level qualification.

Upon concluding comprehensive school, Finnish students can choose between two options of secondary studies, "based on their own interests, skills and success in previous studies" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019, p. 9): *a) general upper secondary education*, or *b) vocational education and training (VET)*. General upper secondary education is focused on extensive general knowledge, and prepares students for higher education at universities or polytechnic schools. On the other hand, vocational education and training is aimed at those students interested in developing working life skills, mainly in –but not limited to– the technical and services sector. Both options of secondary education usually take three years to complete and give eligibility for higher education studies.



The notion of parallel paths of secondary level instruction has its roots in the extensive reforms of the 1970s, when the foundations of the modern Finnish education system were established. The necessity of training the workforce to sustain the rapid industrialization process experienced by Finland after the Second World War demanded the development of a productivity-oriented technical education subsector, separated from the academic-oriented post elementary instruction. Since then, both general upper secondary and vocational education and training have evolved somehow independently from each other, with the latter attaining a key role in connection to employment in the labor market and continuity of studies in the tertiary level (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019). The development of VET cannot be understood outside socioeconomic transformations of the country during the last fifty years. Today, with a new reform under the sleeve, Finnish VET continues transforming itself to respond to the challenges of society, technology and economy. Perhaps the most significant of these challenges is developing a new way of thinking, transcending from a content-centered to a competence-based approach. The future workforce has to be not only highly skilled and technically proficient, but also capable of adapting to a fast changing world, both inside and outside the working life (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019).

The purpose of this research is to study the present situation and the future perspectives of Finnish VET, employing two basic sources of information and analysis: the official documentation published by the Finnish Government and the perceptions of key actors in the field, specifically VET school principals. The first section of the study focuses on Finnish VET as an object of scientific interest, providing a theoretical background that includes a brief historical context of Finnish education and a succinct review of the previous research on the topic of Finnish VET. The second section consists in methodological framework of the study, that is, the research questions and the description of the data collection and analysis process. The next two sections present the evidence collected through the analysis of official documentation and the interviews of school principals, respectively. Discussion and conclusions sections serve as a closure for the thesis, comparing the findings of the study with those found on the previously published research and summarizing the significance of the results and their contribution to the field of VET in Finland.



2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Historical context

The origins of Finnish public education can be traced to the second half of the 19th century, when the country was part of the Russian Empire. In the context of the political reforms promoted by the Czar Alexander II, and coinciding with the beginning of the modernization process in Scandinavia (Högnäs, 2001, p. 29), Finland experienced a period of liberalization in several aspects, one of them being “the removal of education from the control of the Church” (Klinge, 2015, p. 82). The first Elementary School Act was enacted in 1866, at the height of the nationalistic awakening in Finland. The Fennoman Movement¹ –heavily influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment and the German Idealism– saw the instruction of the masses as a civilizing process, in which the development of the individual, the nation and the humanity was a continuum. For instance, the most prominent Fennoman thinker, J.V. Snellman (1806-1881), considered that the very existence of Finland resided in the education of its people, affirming that “the safety of a small nation [like Finland] [was] grounded on [the concept of] Bildung²” (Antikainen & Pitkänen, 2014, p. 3). The first national-level organization for popular adult education, the *Kansanvalistusseura* (Society for Popular Enlightenment) was founded in 1874 (Männikkö, 2001, p. 52).

During the following decades, that scholar Matti Klinge refers to as a time when “the bureaucratic society was being replaced by a civic society” (2015, pp. 80-81), several education reforms were conducted, such as “the access to academic education for women, the founding of teacher education institutions [and] the severing the link between the university and the church [...]” (Antikainen & Pitkänen, 2014, p. 4). However, as J. Rantala notes “the idea of

¹ The Fennoman Movement or *Fennomania* was a 19th century political group that promoted Finnish language and culture. Key figures of Finnish nationalism, such as J.V. Snellman, F. Cygnaeus, A.I. Arwidsson and future president J.K. Paasikivi, all emerged from or were identified with the Fennoman Movement.

² Bildung is a German Word that roughly translates as ‘education’ or ‘formation’, but that has been used by philosophers such as G. W. F. Hegel to refer to self-cultivation and personal growth as the process of shaping one’s own humanity.



general compulsory education started to arise at the very end of the 19th century” (Rantala, 2001, p. 154). By the time that Finland became an independent nation (1917), it was clear that public education needed a profound reform. In the decade of 1920 “about one percent of the population was not literate, one percent of the population over 15 years of age were illiterate, 29 percent could not write, and only 5 per cent had pursued studies beyond folk school” (Antikainen & Pitkänen, 2014, p. 5). Obligatory education for children of ages 7-14 was introduced in the Compulsory Education Act of 1921, making Finland one of the last European nations to establish compulsory education (Simola, 2005, p. 458).

After the World War II, Finland experienced an “exceptionally rapid transition from agrarian to post-industrial society” (Kirby, 2016, p. 145) due to a modernization process that “was achieved in a remarkably short time” (Klinge, 2015, p. 152). Industrialization attracted migration from the rural areas to the larger cities, accelerating urbanization and the appearance of an important working class. According to H. Simola, by the end of the Second World War “70% of the Finnish population lived in rural areas, and nearly 60% were employed in agriculture and forestry [...] Following the great migration in the 1960s, by 1970 half lived in the cities and 32% were employed in industry and construction” (Simola, 2005, p. 458). The late 1960s witnessed the most important reform of the Finnish education system, in which “the structure and basic values of the current education system in Finland were created” (Sahlberg, 2006, p. 148). The 1968 Comprehensive School Act made all primary education public, integrating primary and middle levels into a 9-year unified comprehensive school, thus abolishing the parallel basic education structure, in which students were divided in performance-based ability groups after the fourth year of primary education.

Although parallel school system was deemed as inadequate for a democratic society, as it became evident that it employed a social selectivity process (Antikainen & Pitkänen, 2014, p. 9), secondary level instruction had traditionally been rooted in an implicit social division of work with two parallel lines of education. Already in the 19th century, the ‘lower’ line stressed practical knowledge at elementary or trade schools, whereas the ‘higher’ line of education conducted at upper secondary schools lead to the universities (Högnäs, 2001, p. 30). Interestingly, when



describing the structure of Finnish secondary education by the time of the reform in the late 1980s, P. Sahlberg notes that:

“Upper secondary education constituted of two sectors: the general school that was a general path to higher education, and the vocational school that led to professional qualifications. The vocational education sector had two tracks. The first funneled students into school-level studies, while the second provided college-level vocational education” (Sahlberg, 2006, p. 5).

In the context of the changes introduced in the legislation during the late 1980s, secondary level education underwent fundamental structural and pedagogical transformations. The main objective of the secondary school reform was to offer all graduates from basic school a meaningful option to continue studies at the upper secondary level” (Sahlberg, 2006, p. 5). Under the reform, secondary instruction enrollment doubled its figures: by the 1970s only 25% of the adult population in Finland had graduated from secondary school; by the early 1990s half of the same age group held at least an upper-secondary qualification (Sahlberg, 2006, p. 151).

However, in despite of the efforts to make vocational education a more attractive option to comprehensive school graduates –for example, by equating it with general upper secondary in terms of eligibility for higher education– the reform failed to narrow the gap between the two sectors. Moreover, although in principle both general upper secondary education and VET share an equal hierarchy within the Finnish education system, “[in] practice, upper secondary education was –and has remained until today– a parallel educational structure with two sectors with different educational and social status” (Sahlberg, 2006, p. 4).

The reforms of the 1990s were characterized by the gradual deregulation of the education system. The EU membership signaled the transition to a ‘knowledge-based economy’, a model that “requires a larger proportion of workers to be prepared for highly skilled jobs, workers who have competencies to use new technologies effectively and favorable cultural attitudes towards change and innovation” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009, p. 445). The highly detailed curriculum was replaced by a national core curriculum, although “in the spirit of deregulation [the government] left the content of the teaching for the schools to decide” (Ahonen, 2001, p. 194), thus giving



institutions greater decision-making autonomy. Under the slogans of decentralization, deregulation, accountability, and rationalization, “the Finnish ‘Planning State’ became the ‘Evaluative State’, attempting to practice educational policy through government by results” (Simola, 2005, p. 464).

These policies, that some authors identify as part of a ‘neoliberal era of education reform’ (Antikainen & Pitkänen, 2014, p. 24) had an important effect on vocational education in Finland. Indeed, within an economic model that puts “knowledge at the center of economic policies, and makes [...] knowledge producing sectors [...] central to policy interventions” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009, p. 445), the purpose of vocational education was to respond to the needs of the labor market, producing highly-skilled workers through a model of competence-based and customer-oriented education and training. Nonetheless, as some authors underline, the concept of ‘market relevance’ that dominated the 1990s substantially differs from that of the 2010s (Nylund & Virolainen, 2019, p. 330)

For the last twenty-five years, Finnish vocational education and training has adapted itself to respond to the demands and expectations of the knowledge-based economy and the requirements of the labor market. The most recent reform of VET was conducted in 2018, seeking the further flexibilization of the system. The reduction and broadening of vocational qualifications, the individuation of study paths, a strong emphasis in competence-based and work-place learning, and a closer cooperation with the labor market are the key contents of the new legislation. Nonetheless, in a context of reduction of financial resources, the reform introduced a new outcome-oriented funding system, in which half of the budget is assigned on the basis of the performance and effectiveness of the education providers.

2.2. Previous research

Finnish vocational education and training has been studied from diverse perspectives, especially in connection to lifelong learning, workplace learning, adult education and youth



educational trajectories. The social status of VET, the effects of market logic in VET policy production and the implications of employability in fast changing labor market have been the common concerns of the research field, in particular since the turn of the 21st century. For example, in their 2014 article *“Finnish vocational education and training in comparison: Strengths and weaknesses”*, M. Virolainen and M.-L. Stenström (University of Jyväskylä) have discussed the somehow paradoxical situation of initial/upper secondary VET in Finland, stressing that while it carries “the stigma of leading to lower-paid employment and lower-status occupations compared to higher education programmes” its social role is crucial due to the permanent necessity of “an adequate supply of competent work-force laborers” (Virolainen & Stenström, 2014, p. 83). The authors also emphasize the implicit social selection process that underlays the parallel secondary education, explaining that VET has traditionally been seen as the option for students with lower educational family backgrounds, and thus, it becomes a “route for the less fortunate with respect to general education” (Virolainen & Stenström, 2014, p. 83).

Participation in VET is high in Finland in comparison to other Nordic countries. This can be explained by several factors, such as the educational policy regarding youth studies, recent changes in cultural views about particular branches of VET, but “most importantly, general eligibility for higher education [...] and [the] establishment of universities of applied sciences that offer an attractive higher education route for IVET graduates” (Virolainen & Stenström, 2014, p. 99). However, the researchers conclude that increased participation in initial/upper secondary VET does not necessarily correlate with improved rates of completion of upper secondary education, tertiary level studies and employment.

Virolainen and Stenström (2014, p. 94) suggest that in order to gather a more accurate view of participation and completion rates in Finnish VET, the focus should be on the transitional aspect of vocational studies. They propose three ways to accomplish this: First, information about upper secondary completion rates must be connected to data about age groups. Second, transitions from upper secondary education to tertiary education must be assessed on the basis of information on age group, former education and number of qualifications. Third, in regard of employment rates, is necessary to know the number of qualifications completed by employed



and unemployed students alike, alongside with more longitudinal panel groups for comparison (Virolainen & Stenström, 2014, p. 100).

In a further article, entitled *“The current state and challenges of vocational education and training in Finland”*, the same authors, Virolainen and Stenström, analyze the development and challenges of Finnish initial/upper secondary VET during the last twenty years. In despite of steady growing attractiveness of VET drop-out rates pose a challenge to the system, as does the new demands created by the constant changes of working life. The influence of well-being in school atmosphere, the teachers’ motivation effect in the quality of learning, and the group heterogeneity are mentioned in the article as some of the salient challenges in the organization of VET in Finland. Moreover, younger generations are more demanding in respect to education, due to the consolidation of the welfare state in Finland. The end of the Second World War. marked a transition from “a generation of limited educational resources (the generation born before 1935) to a generation of multiple opportunities and welfare (the generation born after 1956)” (Virolainen & Stenström, 2015, p. 58).

The article, published in 2015, already outlines some of the reforms that were effectively conducted in 2018, for example the increased flexibility of vocational qualifications and the restructuring of the curriculum towards competence-based learning model. However, the authors stress the apparent contradiction of combing apprenticeship training with school-based training for unemployed youth, because “traditionally, apprenticeship has been a route for adult education and thus served the needs of further and specialist education” (Virolainen & Stenström, 2015, p. 59). The study also examines the educational transitions from youth to adulthood as ‘back and forth’ paths, that transit several phases before the individual is able to establish a permanent position in the labor market. Educational paths have been simultaneously individualized, prolonged, fragmented and de-standardized, due to factors such as extended periods in education, labor market flexibility and learning personalization trends. Educational transitions are also influenced by socio-economic structures, institutional arrangements and cultural patterns. The comprehensive school system and the welfare state model encourage and support young people to experiment with these back and forth transitions



from a perspective of active self-development through education. In this sense, “young people are not regarded as just a future resource, but instead are supported in their individual choices and transitions” (Virolainen & Stenström, 2015, p. 58).

The article *“Balancing ‘flexibility’ and ‘employability’: The changing role of general studies in the Finnish and Swedish VET curricula of the 1990s and 2010s”* by M. Nylund and M. Virolainen, compares the curricular development of initial/upper secondary VET in Sweden and Finland during the 1990s and the 2010s. By analyzing policy and curricular documents, the researchers investigated the role of general subjects –language, mathematics, humanities, etc.– in the VET subsystem. At any level, curriculum is based on the assumption that previously acquired knowledge and skills allow students “to shape their ability for further educational transitions” (Nylund & Virolainen, 2019, p. 315). In consequence, the authors conclude, “access to general subjects can stratify young people into different educational pathways” (Nylund & Virolainen, 2019, p. 316), let alone that eligibility for higher education is connected. Adds to this, that VET is in itself a stratified form of education: for example, working class background youth is typically overrepresented in initial/upper secondary VET.

Although the relation to the ‘changing labor market’ has been the focal point of all VET reforms during the last two decades, the understanding of the ‘market’ in the 1990s and in the 2010s has substantially varied. Consequently, the conception of the role of general subjects within VET has also changed. Both in Sweden and Finland, the core principles of the reforms were ‘integration’ during the 1990s and ‘differentiation’ during the 2010s. In the former, general subjects intended to promote a wide range of values, from access to higher education and exercise of citizenship to the creation of a flexible workforce, whereas in the later they held a more instrumental and narrow role in creating employable workers” (Nylund & Virolainen, 2019, p. 329). Furthermore, even though curricular reforms on VET have generally promoted ‘abilities’ over ‘knowledge’, during the 1990s VET was less strongly framed and prioritized flexibility and lifelong learning, as a response to a market “that was perceived to be dynamic and constantly changing” (Nylund & Virolainen, 2019, p. 328). On the contrary, during the 2010s, the labor market was “perceived as having more specific demands that have to be met” (Nylund &



Virolainen, 2019, p. 328), shifting towards stronger framing and classification and stressing employability and entrepreneurship

In a recent research, entitled *“Standing and attractiveness of vocational education and training in Finland: focus on learning environments”* authors Heta Rintala & Petri Nokelainen argue that the standing and attractiveness of VET| directly relate to the expectations and attitudes towards learning environments. When defining the standing of VET, the authors explain that it refers to the position that VET holds in the educational system, whereas the attractiveness of VET mostly refers to positive evaluations and attitudes towards the system. Both the standing and the attractiveness remit to the idea that VET can “deliver the desired outcomes, such as a good standard of living and opportunities in the labor market or in further education” (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020, p. 3).

Although VET is thought to offer a smoother and faster transition towards working life, its benefits seem to be short-term compared to those of higher education. Rintala and Nokelainen refer to this as a ‘trade-off’: “VET provides a smoother entry into the labor market, but the early career advantages diminish over time compared with general education” (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020, p. 4). In this sense, VET can actually have a long-term negative impact on the labor market: it is considered a more immediate path to the working life, but at the same time it can divert students from higher education path, and thus, from high-status occupations. The research suggests that this contradiction is also visible in students’ and stakeholders’ prospects regarding learning environments. School and work are usually conceived as separated settings, and consequently, learning environments are built on a principle of alignment; that is, “learners move between school and work sites, alternating between these practices” (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020, p. 15).

Although the recent VET reform intends to close the gap between school and work by emphasizing a customer-oriented approach, individualization of learning paths might overlook the role of peers and social engagement in learning. The research concludes that in order to keep VET as an attractive option, the increasing of learning in workplace settings should not diminish the quality of learning at school, Furthermore, an institutional perspective should be



taken into account when designing VET learning environments, since their organization is usually depends on education providers that rely on existing structures and resources and thus, can see their opportunities of efficiently bridging authentic learning and working tasks limited (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020, p. 17).

The present research intends to contribute to the existing literature by providing qualitative data about the perceptions of key actors in the field of VET regarding the latest developments in the area. When discussing the relevance of this type of studies, Virolainen & Stenström mention that education planners should be listened to more carefully, because “only by hearing their voices will it be possible to adequately compare and develop the quality of vocational education and acquire a more in-depth understanding of the outcomes” (Virolainen & Stenström, 2014, p. 101). From this perspective, collecting and qualitatively analyzing first-hand information from school principals constitutes a fundamental strategy to identify dimensions of analysis often overlooked by quantitative data, such as perceptions, concerns and future expectations.

3. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Research questions

The present study was articulated through two research questions:

- 1) *What are the pedagogic, socioeconomic and administrative foundations of Finnish Vocational Education and Training (VET) according to the official documentation?*
- 2) *What are the perceptions of principals about the successful experiences, challenges and future perspectives of Finnish Vocational Education and Training (VET)?*

The purpose of the first question was to guide the construction of the theoretical framework of the study and to gain more in depth understanding on the ongoing reforms of Finnish VET. By



revising the available documental evidence from governmental sources, the researcher intended to collect official and up-to-date information in order to become sufficiently familiar with the topic the study. Considering that the researcher had no prior experience in the topic, understanding the background of Finnish VET, its foundations, organization and goals was essential to build a solid theoretical base to sustain the field research.

The purpose of the second question was to guide the data collection process. In the attempt of contrasting the documental information contained in official sources, the research sought to collect first-hand information from actual individuals involved in Finnish VET. Initially, a diversity of key actors in the field of VET were considered as potential participants of the study, however, it was eventually decided to work with school principals, since they were considered to possess a larger overview of the topics –administration, financing, pedagogy, etc.– of interest of the study.

The study originally comprised four research questions, but due to the essentially exploratory nature of the research, it was considered that one question referring to the foundations of Finnish VET and another referring to the individual perceptions of key actors in the field were sufficient to provide the research with a basic structure. The definitive version of the research questions was a product of constant dialogue between the researcher and the supervisor, exploring possibilities and writing and rewriting the statements in such manner that they communicate the purpose of the study as clearly as possible. Indeed, enunciating the questions in a short and direct way proved to be vital when articulating this study; that is, connecting the investigative goals with the methodology of work and the data collection and analysis.

3.2. Data collection methods

The research employed two basic data collection methods: *document analysis* and *semi-structured interviews*.



The first method, *document analysis*, was used to gather information from official documentation published by the *Ministry of Education and Culture*, the *National Agency of Education* and other Finnish governmental education-related institutions. Bowen defines document analysis as a “systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic [...] material” (Bowen, 2009, pp. 27-28). Document analysis comprises “finding, selecting, appraising [...] and synthesizing data contained in documents” (2009, p. 28) in search of convergence and corroboration of evidence to gain understanding and empirical knowledge of a particular phenomenon. Although document analysis can be drawn from printed and electronic documents of all types, organizational and institutional documents “have been a staple in qualitative research for many years” (Bowen, 2009, p. 28), as they serve the function of “tracking change and development” (2009, p. 30) of an ongoing research problem.

A major advantage for the document analysis was the availability of the information. In Finland, official documentation and divulgation materials are usually of public access, being available for free download in digital format at the governmental websites. Documents are presented in highly detailed form, with attractive graphic design and visual aids, such as photographs, statistical charts and diagrams, making the content easy to understand and interpret. Another remarkable advantage is that the all information is available in English, and not only in Finnish or Swedish, thus eliminating the potential setback of language barrier.

Consulted documentation

Document	Publishing institution	Year
Vocational education and training promotes lifelong and continuous learning in Finland	Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland	2019
What in vocational education and training will change for education providers	Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland	2018
What will change for the student in vocational education and training?	Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland	2018
Personalization of study paths	Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland	2019
Eqavet + indicative descriptors: Eqavet network paper on complementing eqavet	European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training	2018



Anticipation of skills and education needs in Finland	Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland	2019
Financing of vocational education and training – system that rewards outcomes and efficiency	Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland	2019
Work-based learning is integrated into vocational education and training in Finland	Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland	2019
Key figures on Vocational education And training in Finland	Finnish National Agency for Education	2019
Key projects reform Finnish education	Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland	2016
Completion of education in Finland	Finnish National Agency for Education	2019
Report on the referencing of the Finnish National Qualifications Framework to the European Qualifications Framework and the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area	Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland / Finnish National Agency for Education	2019
National education and Training committees	Finnish National Agency for Education	2015
Inspiring and strengthening the competence-based approach In all VET in Finland	Finnish National Agency for Education	2015
Finnish education in a nutshell	Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland / Finnish National Agency for Education	2017
Internationalization of VET - Finland	Finnish National Agency for Education	2018
Vocational Qualifications in Finland 2019	Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland / Finnish National Agency for Education	2019
Finnish VET in Facts and Figures	Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland / Finnish National Agency for Education	2019
Key figures on general upper secondary education in Finland	Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland / Finnish National Agency for Education	2019
Finnish VET in a nutshell	Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland / Finnish National Agency for Education	2018
Vocational education and training in Finland	Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland / Finnish National Agency for Education	2015

However, other bibliographic sources were also consulted for the documental research. Physical books and articles were needed to collect information on specific topics, such as the historical background of Finnish education and the previous research on the topic of Finnish VET. It is worthy to mention that several materials collected during the Master degree courses, such as presentations from lectures and learning diaries made by the researcher himself, were



also used as sources of information. This shows that the Master Program contents and materials were indeed relevant and useful as reference material. In summary, the access to the document and bibliographical sources of information did not pose a challenge; all the information was accessible, clear, easy and enjoyable to read.

The second data collection method used in this research were *semi-structured interviews*. When conducted in a conversational manner with a single respondent at a time, semi-structured interview “employs a blend of closed- and open-ended questions, often accompanied by follow-up why or how questions” (Adams, 2015, p. 493). From the point of view of the purpose of the study, it was essential to choose a data collection method that facilitated exploring the participants’ perceptions and opinions regarding the studied topic, giving the interviewer the opportunity to ask for additional information and clarifications of important issues. A second consideration for choosing this data collection method was the fact that the interviewees came from different areas of specialization in the field of vocational education, and thus, their insight on similar topics could substantially vary. It was fundamental for the researcher to be able to collect this potential diversity of responses in the form of insightful and reflection-driven data.

3.3. Instrument

The chosen data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview. Several versions of the interview questions were discussed with the supervisor during work meetings, with the final version being agreed by middle of November 2019. When discussing the advantages of semi-structured interviews, Adams explains that open-ended questions are recommendable when the researcher “wants to know the independent thoughts of each individual in a group [...] examining uncharted territory with unknown but potential momentous issues” (Adams, 2015, p. 494). Since the field of Finnish VET was relatively new to the researcher, this type of approach was deemed as suitable: questions sought to inquire broad topics but also gave the opportunity to clarification and particular remarks. Also, it is important to mention that the questions did not



intend to raise controversy or invite the participants to a political positioning, but rather propose a natural, conversational dialogue.

The interview included seven main questions inquiring about general key topics regarding Finnish VET, and fifteen sub-questions had the purpose unbundling the main themes into more specific topics, stressing the points of particular interest for the research. The questions sought to inquire the interviewees about three key themes that were recurrent in the consulted documentation: *a) financing*, *b) relationship with central and local government*, and *c) the relationship with the workplace learning settings*. It was of central interest for the study to situate these topics in the context of the particularities of every vocational institution represented by the interviewed principals.

3.4. Participants

An initial disadvantage was that the researcher had no prior relation or contacts within the vocational education sector, making it difficult to find potential participants for the study. The research supervisor provided the researcher with the names of a number of vocational schools in the Southwest Finland Region and encouraged him to contact their principals, requesting their participation in the study. Principals from six schools were contacted by email, explaining the purpose of the study, the topics to be discussed and the estimated duration time of the interview. Five out of the six contacted principals replied the email almost immediately, showing great disposition to participate in the study.

A suitable date for the interview was agreed upon with each of the participants. It is worth mentioning that in all cases, none of the principals imposed a date according to their own convenience; quite the opposite, they suggested potential times, showing a great sensitivity to the research timetable. At their request, the interview questions were sent in advance, so that they could prepare their answers with sufficient anticipation. Also, a privacy statement was also sent to the participants according to the European Union Data Protection Regulations, stating



the strict confidentiality of the data collected and the estimated storage period of the information, according to the regulations of the University of Turku.

Four interviews took place between November 2019 and February 2020 in the Region of Turku, Southwest Finland. A fifth interview, scheduled on the second week of March, had to be cancelled due to the coronavirus epidemic restrictions. This contingency was discussed with the supervisor, and it was decided that although a fifth interview would have been valuable for the sake of the data collection, under the current circumstances the analysis should be done on the basis of the four interviews already conducted. Each of the four interviews proceeded in a very relaxed and constructive atmosphere, due to the positive disposition of the interviewees. The principals discussed the topics of the interview with openness, frankness and clarity. They were eager to elaborate on the successful practices of their schools, but also demonstrated a critic eye when debating the challenges that they face, especially in the context of the latest reforms.

Overview

	Interviewee	Gender	Interview place	Interview date	Recording time
1	P1	Female	Turku	28.11.2019	01:26:06
2	P2	Female	Turku	2.12.2019	01:09:00
3	P3	Male	Kaarina	16.1.2020	00:31:53
4	P4	Male	Raisio	4.2.2020	01:27:42
					04:34:41

3.5. Data analysis methods

Due to the qualitative nature of the research, *thematic analysis* was chosen as the method of processing the data. In their influential article on thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke define it as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (‘themes’) within



qualitative data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 60). Thematic analysis allows the researcher to conduct ‘experiential’ research to understand what participants think, feel, and do, thus providing “a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (2006, p. 62). This type of analysis was also chosen due to its flexibility, to the extent that, as a qualitative analytic method, “is essentially independent of theory and epistemology [and can be] applied across range of theoretical and epistemological approaches” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 62).

The time of engaging with the literature –before or after proceeding with the analysis– can lead to two different approaches: one that could be deemed as ‘inductive’, in which the researcher does not engage with the literature in the early stages of analysis, and other that can be considered ‘deductive’, that “requires engagement with the literature prior to analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 16). In the present study, the latter approach was employed, since the documental research and the literature review were conducted before any analysis. This rendered the coding a concept-driven process, in which the qualitative data collected was assign to ‘predefined’ codes already identified within the literature review. In this sense, theory-driven coding was emphasized over data-driven coding. The main advantage of the ‘deductive’ approach is that it can enhance the analysis by sensitizing the researcher with the subtler features of the data. However, Braun and Clarke also warn about the setbacks of the this kind of analysis when they mention that early engagement with the literature “can narrow [the] analytic field of vision, leading [...] to focus on some aspects of the data at the expense of other potential crucial aspects” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 17).

Following the phases to conduct thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke, the first step was to *familiarize with the data*. The recorded interviews were transcript using a software called ‘Otter’, which uses voice-recognition artificial intelligence technology to convert audio files into written text. The recorded interviews were re-listened to and transcriptions were re-read in order to become familiar with the opinions, reflections and ideas provided by the participants. A clear advantage in this phase was the small number of interviewees and the diversity of backgrounds and orientation of the schools involved in the study. This allowed the researcher to get familiar with the potentially code-generating topics in a within the particular



context of each interview. The second phase consisted of *generating initial codes*. These codes mostly coincided with the recurrent topics identified in the consulted literature, although some other, such as references to the influence of the students' social background and the labor perspectives of immigrants, arose somehow spontaneously during the interview. The third phase entailed the *searching of themes*. Based on the identified initial codes, the definitive themes for the thematic analysis were: *a) successful practices, b) challenges, c) effects of the latest reforms, and d) future perspectives*. The fourth and fifth phases of the thematic analysis –reviewing and naming themes– were included in the third phase of analysis.

4. FINDINGS REGARDING THE VET OFFICIAL DOCUMENTATION

4.1. Purposes and structure

4.1.1. Purposes

According to the Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland and the National Agency for Education, the main purposes of Finnish VET (*ammattillinen koulutus*, in Finnish) are:

“[...] increasing and maintaining the vocational skills of the population; developing commerce and industry responding to its competence needs; supporting lifelong learning and students' development as human beings and members of society; and providing them with strong vocational competence, knowledge and skills necessary in further studies and promotes employment” (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019, p. 6; Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019).

Finnish VET is competence-based and customer-oriented, providing the “skills sought after by both employers and society at large” (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019, p. 5) and relies

on the principle of continuous competences development, in order to respond to the constant transformations of a labor market that require solid competence and versatile professional skills. In this sense, VET plays “a key role in promoting economic competitiveness and prosperity” (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019, p. 4).

The development of Finnish VET is “based on [the] quantitative anticipation of long-term demand for labor and educational needs, and [the] qualitative anticipation of skills needs at a national level” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019). The purpose is to produce information about the professional skills that individuals will require in the future and how “this demand can be met through education and training provision” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019) from the perspective of matching quantitative demands with the qualitative supply of workforce. Such analysis is also employed to develop the qualifications framework, vocational skills requirements and methodological guidelines included in the *National Core Curricula for Upper Secondary Vocational Qualifications and Requirements of Competence-based Qualifications*. VET is developed in close cooperation with the working life, to ensure that qualifications meet up with its needs and facilitate an “efficient transition into the labor market as well as to allow for occupational development and career changes” (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020, p. 7).

4.1.2. Structure

In Finland, vocational education and training (VET) comprises *upper secondary vocational education* and *further vocational training*. Upper secondary VET is one of the two parallel levels of post-comprehensive school instruction, while further vocational training includes both *further* and *specialist* qualifications, which are “organized according to the needs of individual students and employers” (Finnish National Agency for Education / Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019). VET consists of three to five years of studies and is aimed both at comprehensive school graduates and adults already in the working life. VET is structured under the form of ‘vocational



qualifications³; that is, officially recognized studies that enable individuals to work professionally in specific labor fields.

Qualifications encompass three types of learning outcomes ‘units’: *vocational units*, *common units* and *free-choice units*, which are either compulsory or optional. *Vocational units* are field-specific core subjects and “include at least 20 credits of on-the-job learning” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019). They can also include entrepreneurial and health and working capacity enhancing competences. *Common units* aim to supplement vocational units, providing the students with competences in communication, mathematics, science physical education, citizenship, culture and arts. *Free-choice units*, on the other hand, “may be vocational units, core subject units, or general or interest-oriented units” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019, p. 8).

Students can complete qualifications in their entirety, partially or by combining parts of different qualifications according to their needs, proven that “the individual’s competences meet the national qualification requirements” (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019, p. 12). Three types of vocational qualifications can be completed through VET: *a) initial or upper secondary vocational qualifications*; *b) further vocational qualifications*; and *c) specialist vocational qualifications*. As of 2019, there are 164 vocational qualifications available in Finland: 43 vocational upper secondary qualifications, 65 further vocational qualifications and 56 specialist vocational qualifications. Near 80,000 qualifications were completed in Finland in 2018 (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019, p. 3).

- *Initial or upper secondary vocational qualifications* provide comprehensive and broad-based basic skills related to a particular field, as well as specialized expertise to work at least in one specific sub-area of such field. Initial vocational qualifications lead to upper secondary level certifications, and are typically aimed at young people in school age – between 16 and 18–, although adult students can also obtain them. Initial vocational

³ The Finnish National Board of Education defines a vocational qualification as “an entity of learning outcomes covering one or several competence areas. The vocational skills requirements and objectives for the learning outcomes of a vocational qualification are based on the needs of working life. Vocational qualification must be usable from the viewpoint of several employers, as well as from the viewpoint of individuals”. (2015, p. 10)



qualifications education can be *school-based*, to be completed at educational institutions, or *competence-based*⁴, to be completed in the form of preparatory education for skills examination competence test or through apprenticeship training. School-based vocational upper secondary qualifications consist of 120 credits⁵ and take approximately three years to complete (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019; Statistics Finland, 2019) giving graduates eligibility to further vocational qualifications or university studies. In this sense, VET is correspondent to general upper secondary, both in terms of duration and eligibility to higher education.

- *Further vocational qualifications* and *specialist vocational qualifications* are designed to meet the requirements of working life and labor market in a more advanced way, often being highly specialized and multidisciplinary. Both further and specialist vocational qualifications are typically aimed at adult age workers at various stages of their career path, independently of how they have acquired their current skills. Although adult learners can acquire their qualifications as competence-based certifications or as apprenticeship training, most of them complete them in the form of preparatory education for skills examination or competence test. Qualifications are equal for young people and adults, and competence requirements are the same in all learning environments, including workplaces (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019, p. 12). Different to the upper secondary level, “further and specialist qualifications comprise only vocational units and the necessity for common units is assessed when preparing the personal competence development plan” (Statistics Finland, 2019). *Further qualifications* require 120, 150 or 180 credits, and *specialist qualifications* 160, 180 or 210 credits (Eurydice, 2019, p. 3). VET also give the students the possibility to supplement their vocational skills without necessarily completing a qualification or a part of it.

⁴ Competence-based qualifications are completed by demonstrating the vocational skills determined in the Qualification Requirements by taking a competence test, which are primarily arranged in authentic production and service situations in the world of work (Finnish National Board of Education, 2018, p. 6).

⁵ Upper secondary vocational qualifications comprise vocational qualification units (90 credits) and core subject units to supplement vocational skills (20 credits), which may be compulsory or optional, as well as free-choice units (10 credits) (Finnish National Board of Education, 2018, p. 7).



4.2. Policies and framework

4.2.1. Policies

Finnish VET is grounded on a *competence-based qualifications system*, that makes “possible to recognize an individual’s vocational competencies regardless of whether they were acquired through work experience, studies or other activities” (Finnish National Agency for Education / Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019, pp. 6-7). Qualifications are completed by demonstrating specific skills through a *competence test*, “which are primarily arranged in authentic production and service situations in the world of work” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019, p. 7). A competence test can be taken at a specific time, or in the form of a series of tasks to be completed over a longer period of time. Competence tests are arranged by *Qualification Committees*, which “are responsible for supervising competence tests and award qualification certificates” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019, p. 8). Qualification Committees are appointed by the Finnish National Board of Education and include “representatives of the field’s employers, employees and teachers, as well as entrepreneurs as required” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019, p. 7).

Competence-based qualifications candidates often participate in *preparatory training* to complete the required qualifications, although this is not necessarily the case of those who can demonstrate sufficient previous skills. However, it is not allowed to set preconditions for the participation in competence tests preparatory training; individualization plans allow students to progress and complete their competence-based qualifications according to their own pace and interest. Preparatory training is organized by VET providers, who decide on the structure of the training they provide in accordance with the National Qualification Requirements.

Quality assurance is a priority policy in order to guarantee the excellence and efficiency of Finnish VET. It encompasses “the quality management systems of education providers, national steering and regulation, and external evaluation” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020). The activities of VET providers are guided by objectives contained in the



legislation –national curricula and national qualification requirements– but institutions “are responsible for the quality of their own operations” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020), for example by choosing their own quality assurance system. In turn, they must “regularly participate in external evaluation of their activities and quality management systems” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020).

The Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Agency for Education are responsible for outlining and developing the strategies for quality assurance of VET. Institutional steering is based on the provision of information, support and funding, in order to promote a quality culture. Quality assurance also resides in the proficiency of institutions’ teaching staff. Teaching personnel is encouraged to participate in the quality development processes, taking responsibility of their own work, with the perspective of becoming their ‘own quality managers’ (Finnish National Agency for Education / Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019, p. 2).

The current VET strategic policy proposal, whose goals are expected to be achieved by the year 2030, “will be monitored every three years and updated when needed on the basis of the monitoring and changes in the operating environment” (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2019). The main strategies of the proposal include: *a) comprehensive and systemic quality management at all levels of VET, including in-service networks and partnerships; b) customer-oriented quality management, developed on the basis of market’s needs and expectations; c) continuous improvement towards excellence, systematically and pro-actively responding to the changing requirements of the operating environment; d) decision-making, steering and leadership at all levels of VET, based on a wide range of appropriate, reliable and comprehensive information; and e) result-oriented design to produce skills and competences needed by individuals, employers and the society* (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020, p. 8).



4.2.2. Framework

The development of Finnish VET entails a process of constant update, taking reference both from national and international frameworks. At national level, the framework is provided by the Finnish National Agency for Education, which functions as the National Reference Point (NRP) for VET. The NRP is responsible for establishing the strategies to ensure and improve the quality of education provision, bringing together national and regional stakeholders, and supporting training providers in the continuing development of “strategic, on-going and comprehensive quality assurance” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020). Quality Management Recommendations for VET were published in 2008 and 2011, with the aim of “training providers in developing their quality management systems and to encourage them to continuously strive for excellence in their work” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020). Development of VET quality management in VET is also one of the key themes of the most recent legislation, which came into force in June 2019. The new law requires education providers “to implement quality management systems and quality assurance at all levels” but also gives institutions “more autonomy in targeting and organizing their training” (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020).

At international level, Finnish VET is aligned with the EQAVET (European Quality Assurance for Vocational Education and Training). The framework is a reference instrument aimed to help EU member states to promote and steer the continuous improvement of their VET systems on the basis of commonly agreed quality requirements and indicative descriptors, in order to facilitate the recognition of acquired vocational skills and competences all across Europe. Member States can decide on those indicators “that best suit them to support assessment of VET systems and providers and improvement of quality” (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2019). The Framework covers the different phases of quality assurance: planning, implementation, evaluation and feedback. International cooperation and mobility with Europe determines that “one of seven students in initial VET spending some time abroad as a part of their studies” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2017, pp. 9-10). The aim is “to



enhance the competitiveness and quality of the Finnish working life, education and training and to develop students' personal skills and outlooks from a global perspective" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). International cooperation networks aim to provide Finnish VET students "with the competences required in an increasingly internationalized labor market and multicultural society" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020).

4.3. Administration and funding

4.3.1. Administration

Finnish VET is organized at various strategic stages of decision. At the political level, the Parliament of Finland decides on the legislation, provision and annual budget for VET, according to the *Vocational Education and Training Act (630/1998)*, the *Vocational Adult Education Act (631/1998)* and the *Act on the Financing of the Provision of Education and Culture (1705/2009)* (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020, p. 19). On the other hand, the Government of Finland establishes the national objectives of VET, the core subjects and the structure of vocational qualifications according to its Government Programme.

The Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland is the strategic steering, supervising and normative instance for VET, and is in charge of the specific VET policies, including funding allocation. It is also responsible for granting institutions the authorization⁶ to provide VET, in the form of a license that determines the provider's educational task and guarantees that educational service and qualifications meet the national quality standards. The Finnish National Board of Education establishes the National Core Curricula and the requirements of

⁶ Authorizations to provide upper secondary VET cover provisions on vocational fields, qualifications, language of instruction, locations, special educational and any other issues that may be required. Authorizations to provide further vocational training include provision of vocational fields, language of instruction, and the numbers of student-years in preparatory training for competence-based qualifications, as well as the number of apprenticeship contracts (Finnish National Board of Education, 2019, p. 19).



competence-based qualifications and assessment methods for vocational skills. In addition, it “coordinates national projects to develop education, training and teaching, monitors learning outcomes and anticipates changes in educational and skills needs” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020, p. 19). The Board also funds and coordinates national projects to increase the productivity of VET, develop teacher training and support internationalization of VET

In Finland, VET is organized by different types of education providers: municipalities, joint municipal authorities, the state and the private sector (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019). VET providers are responsible for the organization and provision of VET in their region or municipality at upper secondary and further vocational training. Within the limits of their license, providers can independently decide on the kind of education they offer, the method of completion of the studies, the staff they hire and how they are profiled in terms of fields of service and customers. VET providers prepare their field-specific curricula based on the National Core Curricula, and operate in accordance to the requirements of the labor market and the needs of the population in their area. VET providers may be a state company, a local authority –for example, a municipality– a foundation or other registered association recognized by the Ministry of Education. VET provider networks cluster multidisciplinary vocational institutions, usually working at a sub-regional or regional level. The number of VET providers in Finland “has decreased notably in the last ten years” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020, p. 18), due to the merging of vocational institutions into larger entities.

The National Education and Training Committees are tripartite and field-specific advisory bodies appointed by the Ministry of Education that participate in development and anticipation of VET, functioning as a bridge between providers and the world of work. Committees are responsible for “organizing and supervising competence tests and monitoring the effectiveness of the competence-based qualifications system” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020). Due to the close collaboration with the labor market, working life representatives also play a key role in the development of VET framework, for example, by taking part in the design of vocational qualifications, and students’ personal learning plans and competence assessment; and providing feedback for the permanent improvement and quality assurance of VET.



Finnish system has “no specific educational inspection procedures [...] however, the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Finnish National Board of Education or an external audit firm [...] perform inspections to verify the validity of the criteria for allocation of funds” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020). Regional administration allocate grants to support education providers and strengthen their connections with the world of work, for example, in the form of training for teaching staff.

4.3.2. *Funding*

Finnish VET is jointly financed by central and local government, and the resources appropriation is made according to the state budget and the local administration’s contribution. The funding is granted directly to the VET provider, that can decide how they allocate and use the funds. This financing system is aimed to “guide [...] providers to work in line with the objectives of VET and to effectively address skills needs” (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019, p. 2). Financial cost of VET varies depending on the educational services provided; for example, special support or student accommodation generates additional costs. According to the statistics website Vipunen, the budget for VET in 2019 included 956 million euros funding by municipalities and 806 million euros funding by the government (Vipunen, 2019).

The financing system identifies the essential factors affecting the cost of education and training. The costs are taken into account by weighting some of the providers’ outcomes by means of multipliers. Apart from certain learning materials, VET is free of charge, at least at upper secondary level. For further and specialist qualifications, however, “students may be charged a reasonable fee” (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). Students are benefited by school transport subsidies and free daily meals. Full-time students can apply for student financial aid and loans. (Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 6). Workplace learning is also publicly funded. According to the statistics website Vipunen, the average price of the study year per student is 9,435 euros.



Under the latest government reform on VET, a percentage formula called ‘imputed funding’ is used to assign financial resources to education providers. Imputed funding consists of *core funding*, *performance-based funding* and *effectiveness-based funding* (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). The amount allocated in each category depends on the provider’s outcomes, and it corresponds to the proportion of the provider’s outcomes in respect to all VET providers’ outcomes. This funding system “rewards education providers for their outcomes, efficiency and effectiveness of their activities” (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020), by assessing number of qualifications and units completed and the students’ employment rates after graduation. Nonetheless, the amount of time spent on education is not relevant from the point of view of the funding structure (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020).

- *Core funding* accounts for 50% of the imputed funding, and guarantees the stability and continuity of VET providers’ operations. Core funding is based on the provider’s targeted number of student years. The target and the minimum number of student years are both specified in the provider’s license. The minimum is approximately 90% of the targeted number of student years. The remaining 10% is allocated according to needs estimation, which enables the reallocation of resources between the providers. A small proportion – about one per cent– is allocated as a discretionary increase, for example to finance special features that have not been taken into account in the funding system.
- *Performance-based funding* accounts for 35% of the imputed funding, and rewards VET providers for its outcomes. This segment is based on completed qualifications and competence points of qualification units. The main focus is on financing completed qualification units; however, financing based on competence points of qualification units encourages the VET provider to tailor the studies and to intensify study processes. In addition to this, performance-based funding guides the VET provider to target education and training and qualification in accordance with skills and competence needs. A full qualification will be rewarded in particular if the student does not yet have other upper secondary qualifications.
- *Effectiveness-based funding* accounts for 15% of the imputed funding, and is mainly focused on access to employment and further studies. The purpose of the effective-



based funding is to direct education towards sectors which need more labor, and to ensure that the VET provision meets the labor market requirements and facilitates access to further studies. In addition, 2.5 percentage points of effectiveness-based funding is allocated for feedback received from students and employers. Collecting feedback from students and employers encourages the VET provider to plan and organize high-quality education and training so that it meets the needs of both students and the labor market.

In addition to imputed funding, VET providers can apply for strategy funding from the Ministry of Education and Culture. The purpose of strategy funding is to develop VET in line with education policy objectives, for example, supporting providers' strategic development activities and structure, or organizing skills competitions. The amount of strategic funding is determined annually in the budget, within a range between 0% and 4% of the total funding.

4.4. 2018 VET Reform

In 2016, the Finnish Government announced its plan to conduct a comprehensive reform on VET. A new act proposal –in whose design more than 1,500 representatives of different stakeholders took part– was sent to be debated in the Parliament in April 2017, and was approved in June of the same year (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017). The new law, promoted by the Government as the most extensive reform in education legislation in almost twenty years, came into force in January 2018. The need for permanent update of professional competences in the context of a fast-paced changing work life, but also the acknowledgment that in the future there would be fewer financial resources available were cited as the main reasons to update the entire VET system.

The new VET Act, commonly known as *Amis reformi*⁷, repeals the existing acts on upper secondary VET and adult VET acts, merging them into a single act in order to form a consistent whole. Moreover, certain competences regarding labor policy were “transferred from the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment to the Ministry of Education and Culture and made a part of the new vocational education and training system” (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017). The reform has been regarded as necessary to attain one of the basic goals of Finnish educational policy; this is, guaranteeing that every student completes at least a secondary level qualification, in order to reduce the risk of social exclusion, especially among the young population. The contents of the reform can be divided in two categories, based on the modifications they bring to the pedagogic and to the administrative dimensions of the former VET model.

4.4.1. *Pedagogic dimension*

The new reform tends to the flexibilization and personalization of learning paths, shifting the focus from a supply-oriented approach to a competence-based, demand-driven and customer-oriented model. The emphasis on *individual competence* accentuates the relevance of personal skills in regard of the duration of the studies, giving students the possibility to progress at their own pace. Every VET student must design a personal competence development plan (HOS), which also includes guidance and support. This is a significant change in respect to the former legislation, that established that vocational upper secondary studies must be completed in three years, with everybody advancing at a similar pace (Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland, 2019).

The new model values the student’s *previously acquired skills*, shifting the focus to attaining only those competences in which the individual has no prior competence. This is an important change in respect to the former model, in which the content of studies was mainly the same for

⁷ The name comes from the shortened form of the expression “*ammattillisen koulutuksen reformi*”, meaning “reform of vocational education” in Finnish.



everyone. The focus on the acquisition of missing skills shortens the duration of studies, especially for adult students. Before the reform, all the competences need for a specific field were met mainly through a corresponding qualification. Today, vocational skills are meant to primarily meet the students' needs: a whole qualification for those who have completed comprehensive school and have no prior qualifications, and supplementary skill sets (consisting in parts of qualifications) for those with experience in the field. This changes the former structure, in which vocational upper secondary education, competence-based qualifications and apprenticeship training had their own statutory plans (Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland, 2019).

The *number of vocational qualifications* have been reduced from 351 to 164, with the aim of improving the former rigid system, in which a competence could only be acquired only through a specific qualification. The content of the qualifications is broadened, including more optional studies and specializations within the qualification. Admission process has also been made more flexible. Prior to the reform, a single joint application period was available for those completing comprehensive school, with only adult learners benefiting from continuous application. Now application is possible throughout the year, with a spring joint application period for those who completed comprehensive school and for those who have no upper secondary qualifications (Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland, 2019).

The reform also promotes more *versatile learning environments*. Traditionally, VET education took place mainly at education institutions and to a lesser extent at workplace. Under the reform, workplace learning is increased, by giving a larger role to digital technologies and virtual learning environments –such as simulators– as complements for institution-based and workplace-based learning. In a similar manner, workplace learning is strengthened: With the goal of lowering the threshold for future employability, on-the-job learning is enhanced giving the students the possibility of taking part in apprenticeships –under a fixed-term contract between the student and the workplace–, training agreements –without a contractual employment relationship– or a flexible combination of both (Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland, 2019).



Vocational qualifications are completed by *demonstrating the acquired skills* in practical work tasks that occur mainly at workplaces. Performance assessment is conducted jointly by a teacher assigned by the education provider and a working life representative. Further and specialist qualifications students are also entitled to receive pedagogic support in case of learning difficulties, disability, illness or other reason. Under the new reform, working life *representatives become stronger stakeholders*. Cooperation between teaching staff and their working life counterparts is strengthened under the new reform. Traditionally, employers, workplace instructors and school-based teachers were less or more independent from each other, especially at vocational upper secondary level. Now, they have a closer collaboration in designing and assessing competence-based qualifications (Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland, 2019).

4.4.2. Administrative dimension

The new reform moves towards the further deregulation of the system by examining the education provider network, giving institutions increased autonomy, encouraging voluntary mergers, guaranteeing sufficient professional and financial resources and ensuring the availability of education throughout the country. A *new legislation* has come into force with the new reform. Until 2018, upper secondary VET and adult VET had separate legislations. The new reform establishes a single act for all VET, “forming a single entity with its own steering and regulation system and financing model” (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019), in order to eliminate the boundaries between young people and adults, guaranteeing more freedom and flexibility to meet competence needs. In a similar manner, the Ministry grants institutions *one single uniform provision license* to organize vocational examinations and provide education, thus giving education providers increased freedom to organize their activities. Prior to the reform, besides the authorization granted by the Ministry of Education to provide education, institutions signed an agreement to organize competence-based examinations alongside qualification committees (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019).



In line with the increasing autonomy for schools, education providers will be entitled to *award qualifications*: Until 2018, only upper secondary qualifications were awarded by institutions, while competence-based qualifications were awarded by qualification committees. Under the new reform, education providers can award all the types of qualifications available. The reform also promotes the *internationalization of VET*, aiming to eliminate the obstacles for education export. In the past, the possibilities of Finnish VET of transcending the boundaries of Europe were limited. Today, all vocational qualifications and parts of qualifications can be sold outside the EU and EEA. In respect to the teachers' role, the reform moves towards *diversification*. Traditionally, VET teachers were responsible for their own work, and teaching took place mainly at school. A new model is promoted by the reform, in which shared expertise and cooperation are emphasized. Teachers' presence at workplaces is increased, providing guidance to students alongside workplace counsellors. The new legislation reduces principal's and teacher's overlaps between administrative tasks and teaching duties (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019).

A key aspect of the 2018 VET reform is the *new funding system*. In the past, VET was financed through various channels, with separate quotas for upper secondary, further qualifications and apprenticeship training. Under the new reform, the funding for VET is determined annually in the Central Government Budget, replacing the former system based on the actual costs. The aim is to give institutions more autonomy to operate, awarding their effectiveness and labor market transference capacity, while supporting the attention of individual needs, the reduction of discontinuation of studies, and the relevance of studies in respect to the labor market's demands. The new financing model also entails the *reduction of administrative partakers*. Prior to the reform, almost 91 national qualification committees and several other bodies set by education providers took part in vocational skills demonstrations. Currently, about 40 national working life committees are responsible for assessing competence demonstration tests, in order to lessen bureaucracy (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019).



4.5. FACTS AND FIGURES

4.5.1. Distribution of VET students by age group and gender

The statistics show that enrollment in VET programs tends to decrease overtime across age groups. Almost 40% of students belong to the age group 15-19, typically the age corresponding to initial/upper secondary VET. It is interesting to note that male students are majority only in the 15-19 age group; from the 20-24 age group on, female enrollment is stronger in numbers. This suggest that male chose initial/upper secondary VET more often, but that overtime there are more female presence in subsequent VET studies, such as further and specialist qualifications.

	Male	Female	Total
15-19	73,626	48,237	121,863
20-24	20,358	24,135	44,493
25-29	16,398	18,537	34,935
30-34	13,614	16,473	30,087
35-39	11,154	15,627	26,781
40-44	8,391	13,677	22,068
45-49	6,339	11,163	17,499
50-54	5,349	9,378	14,724
55-59	3,012	5,259	8,274
60 or older	681	855	1,536
Unknown	21	12	33
TOTAL	158,943	163,353	322,296

Figure 1: Distribution of VET students by age group and gender (2018). Source: <https://vipunen.fi/en-gb/vocational/Pages/Opiskelijat-ja-tutkinnot.aspx>. Compiled by Juan Romoleroux Lovo.



4.5.2. Distribution of students by field of education, qualification type and gender

Although the total number of female and male students is balanced, there is an evident gender gap between certain fields of VET. The fields of *humanities & education* and *social services, health & sports* are largely dominated by female students, whereas the field of technologies, communication and transport is dominated by male students. It is interesting to note that this sector alone makes up for the 60% of male presence in VET, and is the one that makes VET gender balanced, because female presence is greater elsewhere in the other sector.

	Vocational upper secondary qualification		Further vocational qualification		Specialist vocational qualification		Total	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Humanities and education	1,308	4,620	672	3,120	15	33	1,995	7,776
Culture	4,563	7,908	726	1,194	96	126	5,385	9,228
Social sciences, business and administration	12,135	17,742	5,634	12,402	3,534	5,943	21,306	36,090
Natural sciences	5,850	1,002	354	63	42	18	6,246	1,086
Technologies, communication and transport	79,836	18,783	10,953	2,193	342	3,744	96,738	24,723
Natural resources and environment	5,856	7,215	1,227	2,298	105	180	7,188	9,696
Social services, health and sports	7,617	46,725	1,911	4,230	540	2,835	10,068	53,790
Tourism, catering and domestic services	6,963	14,139	423	2,598	432	1,416	7,791	18,156
Other fields of education	357	66	-	-	-	-	357	66
TOTAL	124,461	118,209	23,646	30,513	10,833	14,634	158,943	163,353

Figure 2: Distribution of students by field of education, qualification type and gender. Source: <https://vipunen.fi/en-gb/vocational/Pages/Opiskelijat-ja-tutkinnot.aspx>. Compiled by Juan Romoleroux Lovo.



4.5.3. Number of qualifications by field of education and qualification type

As of 2019, there are 164 vocational qualifications available in Finland. Vocational upper secondary qualifications correspond to the 26% of the total, further vocational qualifications to the 40% and specialist vocational qualifications to the 34%. The technology field has the higher number of qualification of any type (61) whereas the education field has the less, with only one at specialist level. The rest of fields have a balanced number of qualifications type.

	Vocational upper secondary qualifications	Further vocational qualifications	Specialist vocational qualifications
Education	-	-	1
Humanities and arts	5	6	6
Social sciences	-	1	
Business, administration and law	1	4	5
Natural sciences	1	1	1
Information communication technologies (ICT)	2	2	2
Technology	17	24	20
Agriculture and forestry	5	7	7
Health and welfare	4	5	6
Service industries	8	15	8
TOTAL	43	65	56

Figure 3: Number of qualifications by field of education and qualification type. Source: <https://vipunen.fi/en-gb/vocational/Pages/Opiskelijat-ja-tutkinnot.aspx>. Compiled by Juan Romoleroux Lovo.

4.5.4. Distribution of VET students by qualification type and form of VET

An overwhelming majority of VET students are enrolled in institute-based education, which is the most usual form of education in initial/upper secondary VET. The number of students pursuing further vocational qualifications seems to be somehow balanced between institute-based education and apprentice training, but in the case of specialist vocational qualification –



usually pursued by adults with greater experience in working life– working place education is the majority option.

	Institute-based education	Apprenticeship training	TOTAL
Vocational upper secondary qualification	220,746	21,924	242,670
Further vocational qualification	34,554	19,605	54,159
Specialist vocational qualification	9,600	15,870	25,467
TOTAL	264,897	57,399	

Figure 4: Distribution of VET students by qualification type and form of vocational education. Source: <https://vipunen.fi/en-gb/vocational/Pages/Opiskelijat-ja-tutkinnot.aspx>. Compiled by Juan Romoleroux Lovo.

4.5.5. Distribution of VET students by qualification type and method of VET

Curriculum-based education is exclusively used in initial/upper secondary VET, in particular in institute-based education. Preparatory training/qualification is also largely employed in initial/upper secondary, being the only method of education in further and specialist vocational qualifications.

	Curriculum-based education/qualification	Preparatory training/qualification	TOTAL
Vocational upper secondary qualification	157,827	89,127	246,954
Further vocational qualification	-	54,555	54,555
Specialist vocational qualification	-	25,443	25,443
TOTAL	157,827	169,125	

Figure 5: Distribution of VET students by qualification type and method of VET (2017). Source: <https://vipunen.fi/en-gb/vocational/Pages/Opiskelijat-ja-tutkinnot.aspx>. Compiled by Juan Romoleroux Lovo.

4.5.6. Distribution of VET students by qualification type and education provider

According to the statistics there are 146 VET education providers in Finland, of which 102 correspond to private schools, 43 to municipality/municipality joint authority and only 1 to the central government (Finnish National Agency for Education / Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019). Consequently, the vast majority of VET students belong to institutions jointly administered one or more municipalities. Private institutions are the second larger group, followed by single-municipality administered institutions.

	Vocational upper secondary qualification	Further vocational qualification	Specialist vocational qualification	TOTAL
Central government	636	18	-	654
Local government	49,236	6,588	4,083	59,904
Private	54,309	21,234	9,663	85,179
Joint municipal authority	137,406	25,977	11,751	175,134
Åland autonomous region	861	-	-	861
Unknown	222	342	-	564
TOTAL	242,670	54,159	25,467	

Figure 6: Distribution of VET students by qualification type and education provider. Source: <https://vipunen.fi/en-gb/vocational/Pages/Koulutuksen-j%C3%A4rjest%C3%A4j%C3%A4--ja-oppilaitosverkko.aspx>. Compiled by Juan Romoleroux Lovo.

5. FINDINGS REGARDING THE PERCEPTIONS OF VET PRINCIPALS

5.1. Successful practices

5.1.1. Cooperation with the world of work

Principals consider that one of the most important aspects for the successful functioning of VET institutions is their capacity of consolidating strong relationships with the working life. In this

sense, openness and readiness to respond to the requirements of the employers is a key aspect that education providers constantly seek to improve. Cooperation with workplaces becomes more relevant in the context of ageing population and lack of sufficient workforce in Finland.

Close companionship with companies is really important in vocational education. We can't work well if we are closed. The main thing is that we go there [to the companies] to ask what they want, what they need; tot so that we are saying 'we want this', 'let's do like that'. We have to be open and ask companies what they want. And of course because in Finland we have this problem now that our people are aging and there are not enough workers. Companies are in problem because they don't get skilled people [P2].

We have a good relationship to real work and companies. So, we can organize that students, go to practice the real world and companies. So, it is not the problem to ask to get these places. Also we are listening very carefully to companies. The car department (automotive mechanic) is good example that cars are more electric nowadays than before. So we take care [that] they have to learn those things modern car needs [P4].

Principals emphasize that successful school and working life partnership must be based on a reciprocal and mutual benefit relation.

So I usually say that is this kind of 'win-win-win' three times. Companies gets skilled workers; our students get working life in the future and school have good image. Also we get information about their processes. That means that we have to open our schools if the companies can come to our school and we go to companies, not only students also teachers, leaders, so we learn together, how to do things better in the future [P2].

The role of teachers as mediators between institutions and the world of work is also emphasized as a successful aspect in terms of cooperation between schools and companies.

In our school we have career counselors, people who are responsible for this kind of connections and of course every teacher has to know where to put their students. The teachers, know, the factories or the companies where the students can go, because the students have to be at least half a year in a company, learning by doing [P1].

An example of successful cooperation between schools and companies are jointly organized events, in which companies visit schools to promote themselves and look for potential workers among students. This type of 'work fairs' are an interesting opportunity for companies to get in contact with students who are looking for job options.



Something new which we have done is that the school is having 'special days' with the companies. Companies come here to the school, and first the teachers are talking to the company's workers, what we should do in our education, do they want some new things we should do? And in the afternoon, the students are talking to the company's employees and companies. At the end of the day, the students can ask the jobs from the companies or the companies can tell that, we have we need new workers if you are interested come to us [P3].

Alliances with bigger corporations are another strategy employed by education providers to promote future employability of students. Larger companies providing customer services have a great rotation of employees and are suitable places for younger students who need to practice their vocational skills in real life workplace settings.

We have this particular area, TOK (S-Group), a big organization which has restaurants and shops. They get over 500 new workers every year. Because that those branches are that like, there's a lot of people working a while in, for example, a restaurant and then change work, and then they find another... rotation all the time. And so they need all of the time new people to work there. And now we have very good partnership with TOK. They have specialists who come to teach in our school, for example, restaurant services. And also when they want to have our students to practice there [P2].

5.1.2. Other institutional experiences

Principals consider that their institutions have been successful in providing individualized and constant support to their students, especially of those with special needs and in risk of social vulnerability is another practice that principals mention when reflecting on the keys to their success.

I think our strength is that we have every group has a teacher who takes care of that group, our teacher they take care work really, really well. If they see that you don't come to school or your studies I think our strength is that we have [...] a teacher who takes care of that group [...] they work really, really well. If they see that [the students] don't come to school [they will ask students:] Hey, what's the problem? Why you are not here? That is one of our strengths [P4].



Principals also reference voluntary institutional fusions as a good strategy to sum efforts and strengthen their competitiveness. However, they also acknowledge that merges are not always easy to accomplish, especially when there is the risk of clashing between institutional cultures.

So we thought that it could be much more powerful when we put them together (merging two schools) and then we have more force for the administration and everything like that. I think that this fusion we made, it has been a huge work because we have evaluated everything. Because we have two kind of cultures, even we have done the same kind of work, we have done it a little bit different. We have evaluated every task we do, and it has been, and it still is, a very big job to do [P1].

Incorporating entrepreneurship and business skills is also identified as a successful practice, to the extent that it enhances the employability perspectives of the students.

And then, one thing I am proud of is that we have united business studies to what we do to many of our students. They start their own business and they have... lots of them have small companies, in agriculture or in forestry that something that I think we are good [P3].

5.2. Challenges

5.2.1. Budget allocation

Principals report substantial differences between private providers and municipality-owned schools and in terms of financing structure. For instance, the principal of a private institution explains that they receive their financial resources directly from the Ministry of Education, and how they are responsible for providing their own education-related services.

We get our allowance from the government. They say how much we get money; we get the money directly from the government, but they say the maximum "you'll have money for this amount of students". And, of course, they calculate the money... and we use all the money to arrange this education. And we also provide every services in our schools, food, cleaning, we own our buildings and everything. So we're like [...] a company; we don't have any money from multiple cities or anything... we are a private school; sort of a company [P1].

In respect to the allocation of financing, the budget for private providers depends on the number of the students, which is calculated annually. Due to the characteristics of vocational education, there is not a permanent number of students, especially among those pursuing further vocational qualifications.

I don't apply any money anywhere because it depends how many students we have and what kind of students we have. And there's a law which says how much money we will have. We don't count students' numbers; we count how many days they are at school every day. We put on our system how many students are now at school and we count every day. And we call it 'student year' [P1].

On the other hand, the principal from a municipality-owned schools describes how the financing system works for them. The municipality decides on the allocation of resources for education according to their budget distribution, and schools must apply for annual budget from the city. This puts schools in an uncertain position, since the allocation of funds for education might be done even before knowing what the city total budget will be.

We are owned by the city... and our budget is so that we have to apply each year. And that money comes from Minister of Education to the city, it doesn't come for us, because the city is our owner. And then we have to ask from the city, how much money they give us so we can operate. But we don't know how much money the Minister of Education will give to the city, we don't we don't have that information. So, the city doesn't know how much they will get, but already they have decided how much money is for us [P2].

Uncertainty about yearly allocation of money seems to have greater effect in specialized technical schools that demand bigger spending in infrastructure and machinery.

The amount of money is changing every year. It's very difficult to make long term planning costs you don't you know only work for one year how much you get funding, we have lots of buildings, we need lots of machinery which are quite expensive. Forestry cutting machine, it costs 1 million euros and, and timber tractors 500,000 euros. So, so we need expensive machines. And that's a little bit difficult. [P3].

A major challenge for municipality-owned providers is that an important portion of the city budget is destined to social security and health services, leaving education in a disadvantageous position. This might lead schools to consider becoming private companies, so that they can receive funding directly form the government. However, principals acknowledge that this is not an easy decision to make.



It's [a] very big thing for us, because we have been thinking quite many years to become the company, because then we would get money straight. We don't have to discuss with the city, we don't have to discuss with politicians. Because the biggest funding in the city is for Social (Security) and Health. So we have this problem all the time. Social and healthcare takes most of the money. If we were a company, then we don't have to think about health care or that kind of things because we can money straight. Now, we have new decision that in next autumn we have to decide what to do, shall we become company or shall we continue in the city [P2].

5.2.2. Students' socioeconomic background

The increasing risk of vulnerability and marginalization associated with family and social background, in particular among younger students, is also mentioned by principals as a major challenge in VET schools.

it's also a problem that in Finland, our especially our young people have a lot of mental problems and that's, that's a very bad thing. Our students, some of them have very difficult backgrounds, and they can be mental problems, but also using drugs, that kind of things. So then, when education doesn't solve their problems, they need something more. And this is... that's good that we have a lot of people working in these problems [P1].

Unfortunately, it's even that in Finland. We have a very strong value in equality, but unfortunately, it is so that the less your family has education, then you will get lower education. Yes, it's the same; everybody has the same possibilities, but people don't have that kind of goals. I think it's more about motivation [P1].

And one thing that has increased is students' personal life background, you know, they have maybe a little more problems. Maybe they don't have money or families broken, and it causes problems, you're not so focused to study, you have too many problems in your personal life. And I think this is the problem in the whole system, probably in the whole country [P4].

Although schools usually have specialized staff to provide support for students, it is suggested that teachers not always know how to deal with these issues. Moreover, the principals acknowledge that in certain circumstances the support that the school can provide is limited.

We have psychologist, curators, psychiatric nurses, etc. And those and our teachers are there to help our students. But of course that's also something new for them. So for some of them is like "Do we have to work



with this kind of problems?" Yes, it is. We try to solve them together. You can just close your eyes and don't see them [P2].

Besides, when a student comes and says I have to stop, I can't study anymore, we try to look back at why... quite often there are social problems apparently in personal life, so they are too tired to study here. Yes, we have a person who's here who take care of this. But if you have so big problems we can't help, it's not our job... but of course we try to help as much as we can [P4].

5.2.3. Heterogeneity of students

Principals report difficulties of integration of immigrants, even those who are highly skilled. The structure of the labor market or even a hint of discrimination are mentioned as possible causes for this. Limitations connected to Finnish language skills is also mentioned in relation to the learning skills of foreigner background students.

We have this immigrant thing also, what we can do so that immigrant background people get a higher education, so they have possibility really to go on to further education. And this of course the Finnish language is quite difficult. Is one of the big problems, but unfortunately, is not the only problem we have. There's the problem of working places... it's not really racism, but when we have high educated immigrants, they can't get workplaces, even when they have higher education [P2].

And of course, we have students here that their mother tongue is not Finnish. So the Finnish language is a challenge for those too sometimes. Maybe they can speak you know, everyday small talk, but when we [are] talking about professional [technical or field-specific language], it's quite different [P4].

5.2.4. Drop-out rates and educational attainment

High drop-out rates, lower graduation rates and early incorporation of students to the world of work are also mentioned by principals as major challenges in their schools.

In our schools we have had many years the problem that quite too many students quit. And that is something we have tried to work out. We investigate every student who quits. Why? What is the reason why he or she



quits? And on the other side there are students who don't graduate. My goal is that 100% of the students who come to our school would graduate, but it's, it's less than 70% at the moment [P3].

Some of the students go to work (start working) before they graduate. And that is also a problem. Especially in the social and health healthcare department, where there are so many jobs for them that they think they don't need the *todistus* (certificate) for graduation. But it's bad, because when the bad times come those people who don't have this certificate, they are the first ones to lose their job. And the young people, they don't think about the future as much as they should. And I think these are these are the biggest problems for us [P3].

In the opinion of some principals, there might be a relation between the lowering of education attainment and a change of attitude towards the personal and social importance of formal instruction, due to lack of support by families.

We have talked a lot about that. What has happened in Finland? Why the results are not so good as before? And I think there is not only one reason, there are many reasons. Of course I compare when I was at school what was the system and time, let's say the 1970s. You had to go to school every day. If you didn't go to it was very exceptional, you know. You had to study. It was so clear that nobody even thought 'I will stop education'. But nowadays homes don't support like earlier... they don't take care of young people nowadays, that's my opinion... that the world is different [P4].

5.2.5. *Lower academic skills*

Basic study skills of the students have also been pointed by principals as a problem in VET, especially in relation to technical careers. Comparisons to the level of general skills of students in the previous decades and today were also a major topic of discussion, suggesting that the general level of education of younger generations might be lower. The evidence also implies that financial resources might not always be sufficient to provide supplementary education.

There are challenges, student "opiskeluvalmiudet" (study skills) vary. Some students, it may be this is the first time they are doing something by hands, and it means that we have to give time so they can practice. But you know that changes of money have happened... it means that we should be more lessons, but how much money do we have to do that? [P4].

This has been changed, I have been here about 30 years. I have experienced from 90s to this day. So, the basic skills are not so good nowadays than it was before. So it means that, as I told that we have that extra learning those students, and I think that's a challenge [P4].

5.2.6. *Disadvantageous position of VET*

The unbalance of applicants to vocational training in respect to general upper secondary has been also mentioned as a challenge that Finnish VET, in the context of the demands of the market and the expectations of governmental authorities. The shortage of workers in vocational areas has also been mentioned as a problem.

Of course, nowadays, the number of students choosing vocational training is going down because of course, the government and the future working life requires higher education. Our Ministry of education, I was hearing her on Monday, she said that 60% of Finnish people should be in higher education so that we can keep our economical standards. Because those jobs made by vocational training (graduates) are changing so much that the competences of the workers are not enough [P1].

In despite of this, principals acknowledge that VET is socially important and VET graduates are still necessary for the labor market. They also underline that VET is usually the most suitable option, or even the only option, for particular social groups –for example, people with certain disabilities– to become part of the world of work.

There will be always people who are not useful to go to *lukio* and university, but there is a lot of work that have disappeared, because no one does it... at shops or other services. But when we have this kind of, for example, disabled people or people who have restricted capacity of working, we can find the smaller work, because I think that most of the people need to have a work because it brings them meaning they bring them salary, and they bring a social community... and some respect [P1].



5.3. Effects of the latest reform

5.3.1. Teachers' performance

The interviews suggest that the changes introduced by the new reform are met with some resistance by the teachers. Principals attribute this to the fact that Finnish teachers are usually highly educated, independent and trusted professionals. However, the introduction of so many changes might as well be affecting the wellbeing and performance of teachers.

Finnish teachers are very independent. And they are that kind of expert of their own profession explicitly when they are special (education) teachers. And that's why it's quite hard, it takes a time that the teachers learn a new way to do things [P1].

Well, there's some things for I think there may be an important thing is teachers' education. And in Finland, our teachers have a lot of freedom in the work, even compared for example, for Sweden. There, there's more like checking out that what are you doing now. We don't have that kind of culture. We rely for teachers. But of course we have to take care of that, that they have skills they need and that their welfare is okay. I think nowadays we have big problem in this welfare. There's so many changes that many teachers are very tired because of them [P1].

Principals also mention that they have to be very subtle when suggesting new ways of working to their teachers, lest they feel that their job is not adequately valued. Also, some teachers might complain about the time they must dedicate to administrative 'paper work', as they feel they could be using it for teaching related activities. This appears to be a bigger problem in institutions with larger teaching staff and in those operating through several branches across the country.

And, of course, when we have so many campuses in different parts of Finland, they have their own way of doing and it's not always easy to give up. Because if we say that you have to give up something they feel that we don't respect their work, even it's not a question of that we think that they're not doing the right work... and that's sometimes difficult. We don't say, you are now doing wrong and this is the right way. We say, it has changed and you have to evaluate and go for new 'Amis' way [P1].



And also it's a little bit hard to keep them up to do some new tasks, because there's a lot more of documentation in teacher's work... the documentation and doing by the new way, they are a little bit protesting of that, because they want to keep the time just for the students, which is right, it's normal, but they have to do some administration work too... it must be done. And that's something we are discussing [P1].

5.3.2. *Individualization of study paths*

Principals consider that personalization of learning is an important development brought by the reform. Individual skills and needs are taken into account to a greater extent, both in terms of allowing the most gifted students to advance at their own pace, but also by providing support to those who might need it.

You can have your own way to learn. It's more flexible than before. Before it was more so that you got, for example 20 young people and they start at the same time, they study same three years in same class [...] but it's no more like that. You have to have flexible [...] because there's so many young people who have a lot of good skills and can go faster [...] but at the same group these students who need more education and more help [P1].

It doesn't mean only that you can go faster, but it also means that if you need help, you will get help. So this reformation is sometimes wrongly understood that we try to do as fast as possible, but it's not the thing, but it must come from that what the students need, what he or she needs and that is the main thing and we have to give them what they need [P1].

Although principals agree that personalization of learning paths is one of the fundamental aspects of the latest reform, as a pedagogical practice it seems to be assimilated at diverse levels within different institutions. One of the principals consider that the success of learning individualization is that it brings an 'adult' logic into the pedagogical practice.

What good in this reformation is that this new system is straight from adult education; for example, that you will have that own study plan. And, and you can have your own way to learn. It's more flexible than before. Before it was more so that you got, for example, 20 young people and they start at the same time they study same three years in same class. You have to have flexibility because there's so many young



people who have a lot of good skills and can go faster. But also there are students who need more help [P2].

Other principals acknowledge that personalization of learning paths is new for some teachers and might entail extra work for them, but that gradually they are understanding what the reform want from them. Principals also suggest that teachers must assume a guidance role for their students, and that this demands higher cooperation and responsibility than before.

They have learned more how to work with a group as a whole. So they must learn that flexibility and how to personalize, personalize education. It's something new for those teachers. And so I, I know it will take time that they will learn what it means and what it doesn't mean. So, it doesn't mean that students are alone. It's far from that. It's I think it's the one main reasons teachers must learn kind of role they are no more teachers, they're more guidance. must say that they have more responsibility about students than before [P2].

Nonetheless, principals seem to agree that the key aspect of personalization is that it puts the student in the center of the learning process, emphasizing on the acquisition of lifelong learning skills. In this sense, individuation should enhance the students' capacity to correctly adjust to the requirements of the society and labor market.

I think that the main core of this reform is that the students are in the center; we train from that aspect what they need. Now we have to look what society needs, what kind of workers the work life needs, what kind of task they are going to do there. That's why you do that personal study plan for every student and you look what they already can or cannot do. I think that that's the goal, because the working life is changing so rapidly. So if we now just have narrow way of thinking professions, then what happens? We have to take care that they have capacity to change the profession if it's needed. They have to have this kind of, I would say, lifelong learning skills [P1].

Principals also consider that individualization of learning paths is beneficial for the flexibilization of educational trajectories, for example, in the case of students that seek to resume their studies after being away in the working life.

And also there is the personalization of study paths, it was a good change. In a way, it was earlier (it already existed) but now it was the one of the main topics. And it helps that students, they can come to our school and study and one year after they may be saying, I have to stop, I have to make some money

and then they go to work and then they come back. And also it's a chance for us how to organize education here. Of course, the changes take always time and money. Yes, but this is more flexible system [P4].

5.3.3. Integration of youth and adult education

The consolidation of youth and adult education into a single unit in vocational education is regarded as one of the most visible effects of the 2018 reform. The working structure and efficiency of institutions has been strengthened by this merging, although conciliating the different 'cultures' of adult and young education is not always easy.

So, two years ago, we had this change in our organization, we had before different organization for vocational education for adults and different organization for youth education. Before we were separated, we have different laws, different funding. And now we work together, we have only one organization. Because there was no more reason to be separated. It's better that we work together. Of course, there's a lot and it's not that easy. Because our culture is very different in adult education and youth education [P2].

5.3.4. Strengthening of the school-company relationship

For the principals, another important effect of the new reform in the strengthening of the cooperation between schools and companies. One of the principals described how cooperation with companies works in her school:

One main thing is how we do more cooperation with companies. We are now planning so that we have three levels of partnerships with working life. The first one is every day partnership, which is that students go to study in working places, they practice there and teacher's role is most important. The second level is development partnership. Companies who need workers come in our school. For example, Neste (chemistry company) has a field coal process system in our school, they build it for us, so our students can practice that process. The third level is called strategic companionship (partnership). For example, we have now Meier (shipyard company), we have our whole classroom, the teachers and the students are there the shipyard, they are working there and studying at the same time [P2].



5.3.5. *Financial resources*

An important aspect of the new reform are the changes introduced to the financing system, that awards providers' efficiency and graduates' employability rates. Diverse opinions arise in respect to the funding, especially regarding continuous budget cuts, uncertainty about the yearly allocation of financial resources.

The money we get for every student depends how long he or she study here and how good their studies goes on... we get money for that. And like, I think you know, in all organizations the money is always so that we have to be very careful that we are not in trouble [P4].

At the moment the economical things are quite important because the government has decreased our money about 20% or 25% since 2013, so in in four or five years, we have had to adapt to a much lower money level. The money system is quite complicated... our laws change. We used to get 100% of our money from, from the amount of students and this is basic funding, but now the percentage of this student-related percentage is decreasing all the time [P3].

Vaikuttavuus (effectiveness) means how many how well our students get jobs, or how many of our students will go to higher education. So, this makes our life a little bit complicated because if students are not so good or something like that, it's almost half of our money which come from this. So the government wants to get more of us, we have to get results. And the government is paying for results [P3].

The new reform has brought a new financing system in which institutions get funding according to the number of students they have, bearing in mind that in VET this figure is not constant. The constant change of yearly money scheme and the fact that the new systems awards effectiveness have been mentioned as areas of conflict. It has also been suggested that academic attainment could be reduced

I think in a way, it's a good way that if we do our job here better than others, then we will get more money. But I see the days that the level comes a little easier. You know, it's the temptation that if we get through that students that he will get exams and we will get more money. if you are in in trouble with money it's, in the way, a temptation [P4].

Before, let's say, it was more clear to plan how much money we could get. We calculated how many students we have here at school and after that, it was able to calculate how much money we get. But now you like you



said that 50% comes from if they are here. We don't know exactly how much money we will get. Like I said that because I have to take care of resources. So it's very it's more complicated nowadays [P4].

5.4. Future perspectives

Principals are aware that changes introduced by the new reform will take time to show their effects. The first year was a transitional time, but now institutions are gradually entering in the dynamics of the reform.

I think we are just beginning. I always tell to our own people that usually these big changes take at least five years. I think we for the last year we were in 'shock', it's more like... what they are waiting for us what we do. And this year has been more like 'awakening'. Now, our eyes are open that all it's that what they want. And now we're starting to get that what we must do to get that what is wanted by reformation [P2].

The evidence suggests that principals are confident that the VET is going in the right direction. Even though the reform has introduced several changes in the administration of schools, there appears to be that institutions' staff feel reasonably satisfied. They acknowledge, however, that there are still many things to improve to come to an ideal scenario of satisfaction with the content of the reform.

The new way of thinking of being a teacher, of giving education, new financing law, everything has changed. And I'm very happy myself that I think that we have succeeded. And our staff thinks that this has been a good thing. Even of course everyone is standing by their culture but anyway, they think that this has been a good thing. Because now we when we make a query of how they feel, that kind of *työväire kysely* (survey on work and health) they say that the total number was 3.8 in scale of five, that they are content. That was amazing, amazing result, I think, because it has been so many changes, it has been so big things that we have done. And in that way I'm very proud [P1].

Principals consider that VET will continue to be relevant as an academic path in the upcoming years, in despite of the socioeconomic aspects surrounding it. The fact that VET makes students eligible for higher education studies is crucial in the attractiveness among younger generations.



I think the one thing is that vocational training in Finland is appreciated. So that the 40% of this basic school graduates apply to vocational training. The reputation, the image of the 'brand' of vocational training and education is high in Finland. It's not so that you are a loser if you go to vocational training. And also that we have paved that path to future education. If you go to the *lukio* (general upper secondary) you normally go to university or *ammattikorkeakoulu* (university of applied sciences), but also from the vocational school, you can go to the further studies. It's not blocked. I think that that's one thing which we have just succeeded. So that reputation and the image of vocational training is good [P1].

Principals underline the standardized national curriculum as a key aspect to sustain the vocational qualifications model in Finland. In their opinion, standardized plans allow institutions and workplace settings to 'speak the same language' and avoid possible discrepancies in learning outcomes across the country.

The first thing what comes to my mind is that our education is quite standard. If you if you study let's say in Raisio or you're studying in Rovaniemi we have the same standards. We have the *opetussuunnitelma* (curriculum) for example, in car repairing training [...] we have one plan, the same standard in the whole country [P4].

Principals also stress the high quality and trust for the teachers in Finland to sustain the effects of the reform in the long term. Well prepared and capable teachers also have a direct effect on their students' future working prospects.

All teachers have good education. I don't know in other countries, but you know, this is this is, in a way, it's a standard as well. Yes. So you can trust it if you are a teacher there is certain education in our teachers [P4].

Also we appreciate teachers in Finland. Also in vocational school, it's appreciated work and salaries are competitive for teachers. Teachers want to educate themselves higher and higher, and that's the one reason that we have good teachers. And then the education is very good... we can provide good professions which can have good salaries and could work in places [P1].

The close connection between theory and practice, an inherent feature of VET, is also stressed by principals as an important future perspective, due to the cooperation level with working life.

I think it is the practical teaching which we are doing, so that the students when they are not sitting in the classrooms, they are they are doing things with animals or machines, it means that they have, they have good skills for the jobs, the future jobs. And I think that this is this is something which where we are good [P3].



6. DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study are consistent with those found in previous research in respect of the challenges and future perspectives of VET in Finland. At the same time, the result of this study provides novel information about the implications of the latest VET reform from the perspective of school principals. Due to the relatively short time since the implementation of the new VET reform, literature about its effects is not abundant yet, although some studies already outlined its anticipated outcomes, for example, in the 2014 study by M. Virolainen and M.-L. Stenström about the current state and challenges of VET in Finland. Recent literature reports the latest developments of particular aspects of VET that were not directly addressed in the present study, for example, the 2020 article by H. Rintala & P. Nokelainen about the effect of learning environments in the attractiveness of VET.

Although there is an agreement on the fact that the latest reform “[has] been influenced by a principle of market relevance” (Nylund & Virolainen, 2019, p. 329), whereas principals report flexibility and lifelong learning skills as important assets in VET, other research suggest that labor market is increasingly perceived as a less open system with specific demands to be met by students (Nylund & Virolainen, 2019, p. 328). Nonetheless, the findings in the present study are, in general, similar to that in the literature that stress that VET is only successful to the extent that it can help students to effectively adapt to the demands of the labor market. The importance of including entrepreneurship skill in VET curricula mentioned by one of the principals is also briefly underlined in Nylund & Virolainen article.

The eligibility for higher education studies –in particular for universities of applied sciences– mentioned in Nylund & Virolainen (2019, p. 328) and Virolainen & Stenström (2015, p. 70) is an important aspect of the relevance of VET that is also reported by the interviewed principals. The present study also shows that since VET is not perceived as an academic dead end, it contributes to increase inclusion in Finnish education. An important aspect that was not mentioned by the principals but is cited by Virolainen & Stenström (2014, p. 99) is the improved cultural image of VET due to the visibility of certain professions in popular media –for example,



gardeners and chefs. Furthermore, internationalization of education and skill competitions were only tangentially mentioned by principals in the present study.

The findings of the present study in relation to the individualization of study paths are comparable to those mentioned in other research. VET principals consider that the key aspect of personalization is that it puts the student in the center of the learning process, however they did not mention that individualized approach could entail potential challenges, for example, the overlooking of the role of peers and social engagement in learning (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020, pp. 14-15). Additionally, even though principals acknowledge that individualization might enhance the students' future perspectives in the world of work, they overlooked the fact that the expansion of higher education makes VET graduates' transition to the labor market more difficult, due to the "increasing their competition in the workplace with higher education graduates" (Virolainen & Stenström, 2014, p. 99).

Regarding the challenges that Finnish VET face, the findings in the present study are comparable with those found on Virolainen & Stenström. For instance, they stress that "dropping out is reflected in a slower transition to employment, possible decrease in educational attainment, and general experience of failure" (Virolainen & Stenström, 2015, p. 52), an approach that is complemented by the interviewed principals when they mention mental health problems and substance abuse as reasons for conflicted academic transitions. Principals consider that social background and family support are increasingly affecting educational attainment and future career perspectives of students in VET, an aspect that Virolainen & Stenström (2015, p. 58) stress when they underline that "social background could also still be seen as connected to the young people's educational careers".

Furthermore, the indirect effect of welfare state model as a factor in the shift of attitude in respect to education –mentioned by one of the interviewees– can be connected with the assertion of Virolainen & Stenström about how "Structural factors and the educational opportunities provided in a society have a strong influence on people's educational choices" (Virolainen & Stenström, 2015, p. 58). Remarks about the heterogeneity of students groups as



challenge for VET organization are found both in the principals' perceptions and in the revised literature, with both concluding that a more responsive VET system is necessary.

Finally, in regard of the cooperation between schools and the world of work, the present research has drawn comparable conclusions to those found on the specialized literature. Although closer partnership with companies is essential for the strengthening of Finnish VET, it is believed that workplaces might provide too narrow and specialized skills, apart from not having strong educational cultures (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020, p. 15). Nonetheless, the present study suggest that VET schools are advancing towards closer cooperation with the world of work, for example by implementing strategic partnerships that allow students to practice vocational skills in real-life situations. Also, literature underlines an apparent contradiction of combining apprenticeship training with school-based training in initial VET, because apprenticeship is seen as a typically adult learning path (Nylund & Virolainen, 2019, p. 320). In fact, Virolainen & Stenström (2015, p. 58) wondered in 2015 if this educational policy shift would be welcomed by employers. The present research shows that after the reform, youth and adult education have been consolidated into one single entity, and VET school principals attest the improvement brought by this merge.



7. CONCLUSIONS

The present research intended to be an opportunity for VET school principals to voice their own perceptions about the good practices, challenges and future perspectives of Finnish VET. Acquiring a deeper understanding of the effects of political decisions on education and improving the quality of the system at largest is only possible insofar key actors involved in the everyday of schools can express their concerns, opinions and expectations. Finnish VET principals are highly prepared professionals, knowledgeable in the multidisciplinary aspects of school management, and their experience should be constantly taken into consideration by authorities and policy makers. Moreover, this study shows that school principals are eager to discuss the successful and challenging aspects of VET with an open and critical eye, but that the opportunities to do so are fewer than they would like.

Principals are confident that the VET is going in the right direction. Even though the reform has introduced several changes in the administration of schools, these changes are understood as necessary to improve the quality and attractiveness of VET in front of the expansion of higher education. The new prospect of VET is based on the idea that working life is constantly changing, perhaps at a faster pace today than in the past, due to the advance of technologies and the requirements of globalized labor market. New jobs and careers appear, others become obsolete and others disappear; students' needs are becoming more individualistic, demanding the individualization and flexibilization of learning paths. Principals acknowledge, however, that there are many aspects yet to improve to come to an ideal scenario of satisfaction with the contents of the reform.

VET will remain a relevant study path in Finland for the upcoming years, in spite of its relatively disadvantageous position in respect of general upper secondary. Society acknowledges the fundamental role of VET in sustaining the country's labor market and economic standards, companies deem it as an important source of workforce, and students see it as a pathway to both higher education and working life. VET providers are moving towards the competence-based and customer-oriented approach, strengthening their



cooperation with the world of work. Although employment is the essential goal of VET, the obtaining of qualifications should not be the end of education trajectory: vocational studies must open the door to wider future labor scope, higher education studies and ultimately, lifelong learning. Teachers' role both inside and outside the classroom acquires a new dimension, as guiders of the learning process and mediators between the school and the companies. Principals acknowledge that there is still a long way to transit, because the most profound changes often clash with the institutional culture, teachers' independence and students' expectations alike.

The economic dimension is the most addressed aspect of the new VET reform by school principals. The new imputed funding system seeks to enhance performance and effectiveness of education providers, but the evidence suggests that institutions experience its effects differently, depending on the size of the organization, the type of ownership, and the infrastructure and supplementary services required. The uncertainty about the yearly and the student-based allocation of funds might put schools' planning capacity at stake. The particular characteristics of VET, in which the number of students can vary even every day. The reduction of financial resources the yearly allocation put. Furthermore, aspects that directly affect funding, such as dropout rates and lower employability belong to larger societal phenomena that providers have no control over.

Socioeconomic background is increasingly becoming an influential factor for the educational attainment of VET students in Finland. The influence of the social environment, lack of family support, lower individual expectations and mental health problems have been mentioned by VET principals as marginalization and vulnerability risk factors. The evidence suggests that the prevalence of these problems is connected with less financial resources for education, to the extent that it reduced the response capacity of professional school staff to identify and deal with this kind of problems. The situation of foreign background students and the language question in Finnish VET is also should also be addressed more directly, since their implication and effects appear to be overlooked.



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APPENDIXES

Interview questions for VET principals

1. Please introduce yourself and briefly tell me about your academic background and professional experience.

1.1. How long have you been the principal of the school?

1.2. Do you also have teaching hours at the school?

2. What are your tasks/responsibilities as the principal of the school?

2.1. In regard of applying for financing and managing the school's budget

2.2. In regard of the relationship with local and central governmental levels

2.3. In regard of the relationship with companies, factories or other workplace learning settings

3. Please tell me about the successful (past or present) educational experiences and managerial practices of the school, for example, innovative teaching practices, use of information technologies, employability opportunities for graduates, etc.

4. In a similar manner to the successful experiences, would you like to reflect on those aspects that you think have been to some extent challenging for the school?

5. In connection with the previous question, what are the challenges that you face as the principal of the school?

5.1. In regard of the getting financing or budget for the institution

5.2. In regard of the relationship with local and central governmental levels

5.3. In regard of the relationship with companies, factories or other workplace learning settings

6. Finnish government has mentioned personalized study paths, broad-based competence and close cooperation with working life as the key issues of the reformation on VET. However, authorities have acknowledged that there will be also fewer financial resources available in the future (in despite of ear-funding of 235 million euros for VET, according to the news). After almost



two years since the latest reformations for VET were conducted, how do you evaluate its effects from your institution's perspective:

6.1. In regard of how school financing has changed

6.2. In regard of the relationship with local and central governmental levels

6.3. In regard of the relation of the institution with the workplace learning settings

7. As a closure for the interview, I would like you to reflect on the future perspectives of VET in general and your school in particular.

7.1. What things have been done correctly and should be continued? In which aspects do you think there is a need for improvement?

7.2. What do you think that other countries can learn from Finnish VET?