
Towards Life-long Learning – Vocational Business Education for Adults in Finland

1 Introduction

In this article, the Finnish vocational adult education system and business education for adults are discussed. Today, the vocational adult education system in Finland is based on competence based qualifications whilst the newest pedagogical solutions (e.g. eLearning and blended learning), as well as a flexible financing system, provide adults and their employers with possibilities for life-long learning. At the end of the article, three case studies are presented to provide the reader with a chance to observe more closely Finnish business education for adults in practice. The author of this article works as director of the business training sector in the Edupoli adult education centre and is finalising his doctoral dissertation regarding strategic human resource development, especially in the context of the SME-sector. The close interaction between working life and vocational adult education is highlighted throughout the article.

2 The Vocational Education System in Finland

The education system in Finland consists of three levels: compulsory, secondary and high-school. In these levels, the main educational institutions are comprehensive schools, upper secondary schools, vocational institutes, polytechnics and universities (Figure 1). Today, the Government's goal is to develop the system in accordance with the principle of lifelong learning and to make it internationally compatible. Thus, special attention is being paid to the content of education and the methods of instruction, as well as to educational standards and equality (Ministry of Education 2004a; National Board of Education 2004).

Vocational education is provided by institutes or providers of vocational adult education. Initial vocational education is provided in vocational institutions as well as in the form of apprenticeship training in virtually all fields. The purpose of vocational education is to give students the vocational skills that they will need in working life as well as the skills required for entrepreneurship. Initial vocational education qualifications take three years to complete. In addition to developing vocational competence they also qualify the student for further studies in higher education. Today, on-the-job training at actual workplaces has become an important learning method in addition to theoretical and practical studies in the vocational institute (Ministry of Education 2004a; National Board of Education 2004).

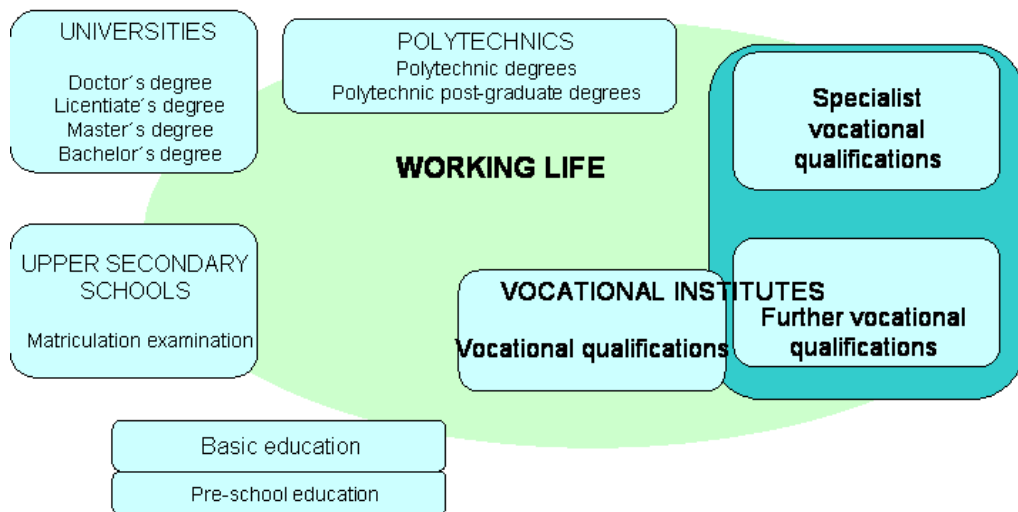


Figure 1: The education system in Finland (Huhtala, Hypponen, Koukku, Nordstrom 2004, modified)

Since 1994 adults have been able to gain vocational, further vocational or specialist qualifications by demonstrating their skills within a framework of a competence-based qualification system (Ministry of Education 2004b). As we will discuss more fully later, the system has been revolutionary for enabling adults to gain formal vocational qualification. As the requirements of the qualification are derived from working life, employers have been active in providing their employees with opportunities to gain official recognition of their competencies. Moreover, as we will see in the case studies, the system has provided both public and private organisations with new opportunities for their human resource development.

With regard to financing, the majority of vocational education is publicly funded or partly publicly funded (including partial payment of fees) (see Ministry of Education 2004b and National Board of Education 2004). The multiple financing structures, though complex and somewhat bureaucratic at the level of the training organisation, have enabled the development of a flexible and future oriented vocational education system. The financiers of adult vocational education are the ministry of education (self-motivated and apprenticeship training), employment authorities (employment training), employers (personnel training) or the student him/herself (e.g. partial payment for self-motivated training or short-course fees) (see Ministry of Education 2004b and National Board of Education 2004).

A special feature in Finnish adult vocational education is the possibility for adults to participate in apprenticeship training. An apprenticeship is a fixed term contract between an employer and a trainee. In this, students acquire professional skills through practical work. A choice can be made between vocational, further vocational and specialist vocational qualifications; for example a person working as a supervisor in a firm can train him/herself by combining on-the-job learning and contact learning in a training organisation and gain specialist vocational qualification in management. The employer provides the apprenticeship trainee with mentoring whereas the training organisation is responsible for the arrangement of the contact learning as well as the skills tests. Today, apprenticeship training is seen as one of the most appropriate ways of learning and gaining official accreditation of skills for adults during their working life (see Ministry of Education 2004b and National Board of Education 2004).

3 Competence Based Qualifications for Adults

As already mentioned, the adult vocational education system in Finland is based on competence based qualifications, the acquisition of which are independent of the way vocational skills have been acquired. In other words, preparatory training and the demonstration of skills for purposes of certification are considered to be separate processes. This separation enables the training organisation to tailor-make the training according to the needs of the target group (e.g. company personnel, self-motivated learners or unemployed persons) whilst the competencies are evaluated according to the national requirements. Moreover, the personalisation of learning has been one of the main principles of the system. For the adult learner this personalisation is ensured through an individual study plan for preparatory training and an individual plan for the competence test. The result is a system that is flexible and more suitable to the needs of adult learners (see Ministry of Education 2004b).

Today there are about 360 different competence based qualifications on all the three levels: vocational qualification, further vocational qualification and specialist vocational qualification. Annually, over 40,000 adults participate in the competence tests and the preparatory training. The business and administration sector has been the most popular sector together with the technology and transfer sector. In total, there are 22 qualifications in the business and administration sector such as vocational qualification in business and administration, further qualification in sales, and specialist qualification in foreign trade (see Huhtala, Hypponen, Kuoppa, Nordstrom 2004).

The quality of the system is ensured by the tripartite cooperation between employers, employees and education. These parties form the qualifications committees set by the National Board of Education. The qualification committee is the organisation which licences the educational institute to provide the competence tests. Tripartite cooperation is also compulsory for the teams assessing each competence test (National Board of Education 2004).

For education institutions, this system requires the continuous development of preparatory training and competence tests and, especially, close cooperation with partners from working life. For individual trainers, the competence based qualifications provide excellent opportunities to develop the modules for preparatory training and the plans for competence tests. In all, the system is challenging: the role of the teacher changes towards network developer (i.e. closer cooperation with partners from working life), training planner (i.e. new forms of courses and training methods) and perhaps the most dramatic change, the change towards training counsellor (i.e. the counselling needed to develop the individual study and competence test plans).

3.1 Preparatory Training – Towards eLearning and Learning Networks

The preparatory training for competence based qualifications is arranged primarily through open and distance learning. Today, eLearning, or rather ‘blended learning’, is integrated into preparatory training. The use of eLearning consists of (1) the use of eLearning platforms to complement the contact learning (e.g. the exercises are made and evaluated on the platforms in order to facilitate the sharing of the knowledge); (2) eLearning study materials; and (3) competence tests for several qualifications. During formal classes the possibilities of ‘blended learning’ are used. For example, the eLearning platform is used as an on-line opportunity for group or paired exercises during lessons.

Because most of the students participating in preparatory training are working and studying at the same time (e.g. in apprenticeship training, self-motivated training or personnel training), on-the-job learning has become one of the most important methods to develop vocational skills. Thus, the development of mentoring systems has been one of the most successful ways to integrate the processes of learning and working. Educational authorities (such as apprenticeship offices, qualification committees, employment offices, and so on) are close partners with training organisations and these networks are important in the quality of the learning processes.

3.2 The Skills Tests and Assessment

National qualification requirements set the framework for the individual plans for competence tests. As mentioned previously, the role of the trainer is to individually discuss with each participant how the competencies will be demonstrated and how the assessment will be made. As a result, a written plan for the competence demonstration is made. Today, multiple methods are used such as: demonstration discussions, project processes and reports, real-life situations in the working life, written analyses and presentations. Thus, the demonstration of competencies is an ongoing process in its own right – not the collection of separate samples of skills.

The involvement of each social partner in the tripartite assessment process ensures that all aspects are taken into an account during the assessment. All assessors - employer, employee and the representative of education – make assessments using knowledge drawn from their

respective professional backgrounds. Finally, if all the modules of the qualification are judged as having been satisfactorily completed by the assessment team the person is awarded the certificate. If the participant has also taken part in the preparatory training, she/he receives a separate certificate provided by the training organisation.

4 Case studies of Business Education for Adults

The following cases provide the reader with the opportunity to take a look at today's adult education in practice in Finland. The real-life cases are derived from the Edupoli adult education centre. Edupoli operates in Helsinki metropolitan area and there are annually over 4000 students who take part in the training programmes. The vision of Edupoli is stated as follows: 'We have the overwhelming competence on adult education and we are a reliable partner'. The vision is cascaded to the business sector as a slogan: 'Overwhelming business competence – from Edupoli'. Thus, the vision strongly expresses the way in which the daily work is targeted. Moreover, the values of Edupoli are the base for the daily work of the over 100 experts who work there. The values are: (1) customer closeness, (2) the well-being and the development of employees and (3) social responsibility. The leading principle of Edupoli's strategy is that it has to be concretely seen in everyday life. Thus, in addition, the cases provide the reader with the possibility of seeing how Edupoli achieves its vision.

The business training sector in Edupoli consists of six expert teams: two business training teams, a management and entrepreneurship team, computing competencies, international language competencies and a project team. Altogether there are almost 40 experts working as team managers, trainers or training planners. The decision making power is delegated for all the team managers in order to provide fast and flexible working arrangements. The nationally and internationally financed projects are an integral part of the continuous development of the learning processes. An example of the projects is 'Urbanet - women entrepreneur's network' financed by European Union Urban II –programme which targets the development of regional women entrepreneurs in the eastern Helsinki region. Other examples of the continuous development process include the several eLearning projects through which the newest knowledge on eLearning and blended learning are gained.

The practical cases include: (1) management skills developed by company personnel in apprenticeship training; (2) business competency learning in an open learning environment in employment training; and (3) gaining vocational qualifications in business and administration through self-motivated training.

4.1 Case 1: Management Skills and Apprenticeship Training for Adults

One of the success stories of Finnish qualification system has been the development of specialist qualifications in management. Edupoli was one of the first training organisations to obtain the licence to award these qualifications in 1998. Since then, hundreds of managers or supervisors, from both from public and private organisations, have taken the competence tests. The explanation for this success is the huge need for organisations to develop leaders

and managers in order to adapt to the turbulent business environment, and to educate a new generation of managers to meet the growing replacement demand generated by the retirement of the current generation of managers.

In Edupoli the preparatory training for the qualification is arranged mainly for groups of managers from the same firm or organisation. Apprenticeship training has been the most suitable form of arrangement to provide this training as, particularly in management training, close connections to the persons own work is essential. Therefore, the principles of on-the-job learning and mentoring have been the most prominent ways of organising the apprenticeship training. Moreover, as time is a scarce resource for managers, the contact time needed to support learning is organised so that it occupies only one or two days in a month. This arrangement enables the student to get the newest knowledge from contact days and to apply it immediately in his/her job with the help of a mentor. As there is a network of people assuring the learning process (Edupoli, apprenticeship office, student, mentor and human resource departments), eLearning provides the most effective means for all parties to follow the learning process.

The modules of the preparatory training cover the following subjects: strategic planning, operational and financial planning, knowledge leadership, project management, time management and so on. The modules are actually built using the framework modules provided by the national requirements of the qualification. However, the content of the modules are tailor-made according to the needs of the organisation. In the specialist qualification for management there are only two parts: (1) planning of operations and management and (2) operational management and leadership. These two modules have to be passed in order to obtain the certificate. In practice the demonstration tests form a chronological sequence. For example, a person demonstrates his/her plan for a development project during a discussion with assessors and secondly, executes the plan with his/her own team, and then reports and reflects on the outcomes in a second discussion with assessors and team members. Thus, the demonstrations of competencies are an integral part of the person's everyday working life.

For the training organisation, knowledge of the impact of both preparatory training and competence-based qualification is important. Thus, on evaluation, the real changes in the work of a participant are made approximately six months after the demonstration tests. This information regarding the impact of the training and assessment process supports the continuous development of learning processes. As the work of an individual manager is quite lonely, in most cases the groups of management students will form an open 'club' for the sharing of knowledge and, especially, for the sharing of experiences. In other words, the abstract principle of life-long learning has found its tangible form in the context of management development.

4.2 Case 2: Business Competencies in the Open Learning Environment

The second case will provide an insight into employment training. For the past ten years, Edupoli has developed its practice enterprise as an open learning environment for adults in

business education. The integration of open learning environments and the competence qualification system has been one of the greatest challenges we have faced. Today, the European (European Practice Enterprise Network) practice enterprise is used as a learning environment for adults participating in the modular and roll-on-roll-off training course entitled the 'Multi-skilled Business Expert'.

The practice enterprise is a simulated company which is used as a learning environment for business practices. Thus, the students form the organisation in which there are for example, the managing director, secretary and the teams for marketing, accounting and production. The teacher's role is to act as consultant in business issues and to provide the students with counselling on learning matters (e.g. planning of personal study and competence demonstration plans). The facilities of the practice enterprise are intended to provide the student with, in particular, the opportunity to learn how firms operate today and in the future. To achieve this Edupoli have built completely new facilities for their open learning environments. The practice enterprise consists of the modern computing systems which include, for example, wireless networks to enable flexible working methods. The lay out is designed by taking into account the need for flexible team and pair work. The facilities also provide quiet spaces and areas for individual guidance and self-study possibilities with eLearning platforms.

The training is financed by employment authorities and is targeted at unemployed adults. The use of open learning environments has been the tool used to personalise the training. Altogether there are 64 modules of preparatory training for seven different competence-based qualifications. In practice, the preparation of the individual study and demonstration plans means that the trainer works with the student to create a description of the path through which the learning goals are achieved.

For example, a person seeking employment as a secretary is guided by the trainer to pick all the courses from the modular 'tray' providing the newest knowledge and skills for secretarial work (e.g. arrangement of meetings, computing and communication skills, and so on). Of course, prior knowledge and experience are taken into account and accredited. Moreover, as the target is the secretarial competence, it is natural that the person works as a secretary in the practice enterprise in order to apply the newest knowledge and to learn 'on-the-job'. In this sense, the practice enterprise integrates business training and working life. However, it is essential for the person to practice the secretarial work in 'real' firms at the end of his/her learning process (approximately six to nine months). Thus, the demonstrations of secretarial competencies can also be organised in working life in employment training.

In sum, practice enterprises, as an open learning environment for adults in business training, provide an excellent method for the personalisation of studies as well as learning future oriented competencies for working life. Employment outcomes for adults during or after the learning period have been excellent: over 60 per cent of the participants have found their new job in shortly after completing their programmes.

4.3 Case 3: Vocational Qualification in Business and Administration and Self-motivated Training

In Edupoli, vocational qualification in Business and Administration can be achieved through both self-motivated and apprenticeship training. As in apprenticeship training, the students already work in the field of business and administration; in self-motivated training the participants do not necessarily work in the field yet. In this case, we will concentrate on self-motivated training. The usual clients are persons who have decided to change their jobs and focus on a totally new field. Thus, they don't have any experience in the field of business and administration. Some participants also wish to progress to higher education as the vocational qualification provides the adult with the eligibility to study in the polytechnics or universities. Thus, the groups of students are generally more heterogeneous than those participating in apprenticeship training. Consequently, the structure of the student groups undertaking self-motivated training (as with the students in employment training) produce particular challenges for the trainers.

Moreover, the students are mainly working during the day and, consequently, the contact time for learning is in the afternoon, evening or, in some cases, at weekends. For example, the schedule may consist of one to three evenings per week plus distance learning (exercises, project work etc.). The learning process lasts approximately two and a half years and it can be difficult for a trainer to maintain the momentum of the training process over such a long period. The personal guidance during the process, especially the competence demonstrations, in addition to the preparatory training are a practical means to provide the students with short-term targets during the training programme.

The vocational qualification in business and administration covers all the main knowledge and skills needed in working life. It consists of common modules (e.g. business, languages, computing) as well as modules in three specialist study programmes: (1) customer service and marketing; (2) information and library services; and (3) business administration. The structure of the vocational qualification is challenging for a participant with regard to the demonstration of skills. As the vocational qualification does not target an exact profession, but rather a range of professions in the field, the competence tests and demonstrations have to be holistic entities (e.g. projects, documents demonstrating the competencies etc.).

In sum, the learning process and the broad business qualification are positive challenges for a training organisation. But the outcome can be the desire or even passion for life-long learning. As a student stated after her qualification was completed: "The most important part during the training programme and competence tests was the support I received from the trainers, from my group and my family. That gave me strength to continue even though I had my daily work and children at home. Today, I am so happy! Now I will rest for a while and during autumn I will start looking at new learning opportunities [laughing]!"

5 Summary

In this article, the Finnish vocational education structure was presented with a particular emphasis on the adult vocational education system. The main emphasis was to present the state of art in vocational business education for adults. The aim was to provide the reader with the opportunity to see the practice of adult business education by presenting three real-life case studies drawn from the work of the Edupoli adult education centre.

The competence-based qualification system has provided the vocational adult education organisations with an opportunity to develop adults as well as public and private organisations. The challenges for the training organisations are multiple, but two main questions are raised: (1) How to build learning networks and partnerships?; and (2) How is the new and changing role of a trainer to be supported?

First, the question of learning networks is currently very important. The qualifications and the demonstration tests are developed and assessed through tripartite cooperation between social partners. Moreover, the learning network during the training processes is even wider consisting of trainers, students, mentors, HR-specialists and authorities. In order to provide the customer organisations with the possibility to develop as a learning organisation a long-lasting partnership is needed. Second, the new role of a trainer is complex. A trainer is traditionally an expert in his/her own substance and pedagogic methods. Today, the role is extended by the necessity of developing and using networking skills and, in particular, the guidance skills needed to produce the individual study and demonstration plans.

In all, these two questions set a strategic challenge for Finnish adult education organisations. The challenge is to create strategies which provide the training organisations with the possibility to be at least two steps ahead of current working life. This means building a system through which to understand the weak signals providing information regarding the changing nature of working life and, in particular, the strategic leadership skills of managers in order to lead the organisation towards the vision. In sum, the competence based qualification system has been a means to renew the vocational adult education system totally and to build a system which is continuously developing.

The challenge for European adult education and especially for business education is how to provide the working life with continuous and future oriented opportunities to train and educate their human resources. In reality, vocational business education for adults is one of the main means to develop competitiveness in Europe. Thus, cooperation and development activities with all European parties are needed. The close cooperation in the field of adult education provides all the actors with possibilities to benchmark, share expertise and to develop the education structures and training programmes needed to provide the individual adult with the possibility for life-long learning.

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