

Dr. Johanna Lasonen
University of Jyväskylä
Institute for Educational Research
Finland

University of Oxford, UK
27-28 September 2005

Workplaces as Learning Environments: Assessments by Young People after Transition from School to Work

The workplace learning scheme, the Bridge from Vocational Education to Work project (the Bridge experiment) was a part of a quantitative and qualitative reform of upper-secondary-level vocational qualifications implemented 1999-2004 in Finland. Two-year study programmes, which constituted roughly a third of all vocational qualifications, were extended to three-year programmes. Now all upper secondary and higher education vocational qualifications include a minimum of six months' workplace learning period to be done at enterprises or other appropriate workplaces. The goals of the workplace learning reform have been assumed to improve accountability of vocational education and training and to support lifelong learning by narrowing the gap between formal and informal education. The purpose of the study was to investigate, which competences did the students, in their own estimation, learn best during the workplace training period organised by their school, and which ones during their first year in working life after graduation. The respondents thought that working had developed their internal entrepreneurial and social skills, expertise and identity considerably more than their problem-solving skills, skills to evaluate one's own work, and planning skills. In the young people's opinion, the skills belonging to the latter group had developed less after their transition to working life than during the supervised work-based learning period included in their studies. However, the effectiveness of workplace learning is the nature and quality of the supervision and mentoring that the students are offered at the enterprises. The young people who had entered working life seemed to consider a job simply as a job, no longer a place where they consciously thought about or pursued purposeful learning. However, most of them wanted to develop their occupational skills and displayed a positive attitude towards addressing possible changes.

Issues of Current Reforms of TVET in Finland

During the last decade the Finnish VET has experienced three major reforms that are related to each other. The reforms have focused on the qualification structure, polytechnic education, vocational upper secondary education, competence-based training and recognition of prior learning.

1. *Reform in Qualification and Diploma Structures* addressed the issues such as parity of esteem between different occupational areas, and equal access to higher education or/and high-tech jobs. Within reform in qualifications, *Curriculum Reform in Authentic Learning and Assessment* focuses on the issues of youth unemployment, inclusiveness and different learning styles. As compared to school-based vocational education, apprenticeship training has not been popular among young people in Finland; only a few per cent of the age cohort has taken up this type of vocational training. The last ten years have seen a growth in the number of apprentices among adult students. Since the reform of apprenticeship training did not have any major impact on youth unemployment, the workplace learning element was introduced to the formal education establishments.

In Finland, the framework of the workplace learning experiment was created in the Plan for Developing Education and Research for 1995-2000 by the Finnish Council of State. Reforms of vocational qualifications include workplace learning periods of at least six months. The next

Development Plan for 1999-2004 of the Ministry of Education introduced by the Council of State stressed monitoring the reform of vocational qualifications, students' transition from education to working life, and the implementation of routes to further and higher education. Learning at the workplace has become a central element of vocational education; to ensure this, there has been continued support to cooperation between education providers and labour-market organisations. A permanent system of training workplace trainers has been also been created. The Plan for Developing Education and Research for 2003-2008 emphasises international exchanges, among others having workplace training periods in other European countries, and recognising prior learning.

2. *Recognition of Prior Learning and Accreditation in adult learning*: the adult education has faced the problems that have resulted from the different levels of educational attainment between younger and older generations. Recognition of prior learning is most widely used in examinations of competence-based qualifications. System and procedures are devised for identifying, assessing and recognising prior learning which would enable learning to be acknowledged irrespective of how, when or where the knowledge and skills have been acquired.

Generally the Finnish vocational education is highly school-based, also assessed by students' preference. There were 54 700 entrants for upper secondary vocational education (school-based and training for a competence-based qualification) in 2001. As delivery modes, both competence-based training and apprenticeship training are chosen by about 10 per cent of vocational students. In 2002, there were 5771 students who gained their vocational upper secondary qualification, 10221 students obtaining their further vocational qualification and 2931 professionals having their specialist vocational qualification through competence-based training and assessment.

An adult student is a person aged between 25 and 64 who has returned to education after leaving it on the completion of their first stage of studies. However, Finnish educational legislation is based on the principle of age neutrality. That is, all types of education are open to applicants of all ages. Adult people can take part in all types of education. In Finland, adult education courses and programmes are annually attended by nearly 1.8 million citizens or some 54 per cent of the population, a figure that is among the highest in the OECD countries. However, participation is uneven across different population groups. As regards its forms of organisation and regulatory and funding basis, adult education is divided into three basic types: (1) self-motivated adult education, (2) labour-market or employment training, and (3) staff training. The recognition of the individual's previous learning linked with efforts to promote citizens' mobility in Europe and globally is the next challenge.

3. *Vocational Higher Education (Polytechnic Degree) (ISCED 5B)* reform has improved the standard of quality of vocational education corresponding to requirements of trade and industry and economic life, has enhanced the parity of esteem between vocational education and academic education, has made access to higher education from both academic and vocational upper secondary education, has diversified higher education provision, and has attempted to improve local economics by the regional and equal coverage of higher education.

A goal of the Government is to provide student places for around 70% of the average 19 to 21 year old group in higher education. In 2002, 69.5% of those who entered polytechnics had completed general upper secondary school and 29.5% completed vocational upper secondary education. Vocational higher education (polytechnics) provides more student places than universities.

The massive AMK reform may be seen as a series of innovations focusing on the development of new kinds of tertiary education institutions. The means used to create these institutions included extending the length of studies from 2 to 3 years (the norm for colleges) to 3.5 to 4.5 years which is now characteristic of AMK institutions. Polytechnic education degrees (AMK degrees) are currently baccalaureate level. Regionality is characterized by close linkages with local workforce needs and the development of regional economic structure. AMK institutions also engage in research and development by providing for the needs of product development in local industries and businesses.

Drivers of the TVET Reforms and Challenges of Implementation in Finland

The school reforms implemented in Finland in the late 1990s were an attempt to respond to the anticipated trends in the labour market and in the organisation of work, and to individual learners' demands. Changes in the content of work, the introduction of new technologies, current forms of occupational mobility, and the rate of change in itself have been considered to require employees who are more adaptable and able to acquire, in the future, new and applied skills and knowledge.

There has been a search for means of improving cooperation between education and working life. What led to the reform of workplace learning was joint recognition of the following problems among employers, trade unions and education administrators:

- Curricula have been developed without co-operation with employers and enterprises.
- Education and qualifications, on the one hand, and work and the required competencies on the other, have evolved and been developed separately (and not always along the same lines).
- Despite good facilities, the school-based learning environments designed to simulate real life have been unable to generate instruction as authentic as that provided through social interaction in the workplace or familiarise students with the occupational structures involved as intimately as practical experience at actual workplaces.
- School-centred education has been alleged to make young people's transition to working life more difficult.
- School-based vocational education is expensive.
- High youth unemployment rates lead to marginalisation and indicate that there are flaws in the education intended to make young people capable of active social and economic participation.
- The amount of esteem enjoyed by vocational education has depended on its match with working life as well as on collaboration between education and working life.
- The approaching retirement of the baby-boom generation and the emergence of new occupations and tasks will bring a labour shortage in about a decade. The employers want to seek to recruit young people to their enterprises.

In addition to pressures from working life, today's school reforms have stemmed from new conceptions of learning.

According to the Finnish legislation, an objective of vocational education is to provide students with skills and knowledge needed to be able to act as an independent entrepreneur. The results of my survey revealed that the goals for self-employment might be unrealistic. More than half the young people (54%) had never entertained the idea of setting up an enterprise of their own. Two out of ten have sometimes thought about doing so. About the same proportion (22.8%) of them has considered a private enterprise as a makeshift solution. A substantial number of the respondents

(66.5%) judged that their work experience had done little to improve the skills needed in establishing an enterprise. Three informants (1%) had already worked as entrepreneurs.

Perception of Reforms by Parties of the World of Work

The employers thought that co-operation with schools brought them more advantages than disadvantages. In 1999, seventy-five per cent of the managers were going to commit themselves to implementing workplace learning also in the future. However, there was room for improvement in the co-operation between schools and enterprises to develop workplace learning activities. According to the employers, schools make little use of the companies' expertise. Similarly, co-operation could be planned better especially as regards the students' personal study programmes and student self-assessment. The employers and the workplace instructors emphasised the importance of interaction for co-operation and network construction. Their responses indicated that the principles and goals of workplace learning receive little attention in the context of company-based activities.

The match between education and working life achieved within the Bridge project was examined by comparing the employers' and the students' responses to the same set of questions, with the employers considering the skills and qualities needed in working life and the students those they were acquiring through their studies. The managers' responses indicated that in most cases they needed higher levels of the relevant skills and qualities than what the students considered their education to deliver, writing skills being the only exception in this respect. In all, on the basis of the comparison the Bridge project seemed to have achieved a fairly good match between the education provided and the needs of working life. There were minor discrepancies between the skills required at work and those yielded by the students' education in areas such as the ability to use information sources and mastery of the theoretical basis of the given occupation, whereas the area of initiative, independent thinking and life management revealed a wider gap between the managers' skills requirements and the students' perceptions of their own training-delivered skill levels.