

Strategies for Moving Freely

The Finnish Approach to Vocational Education and Training (VET)

Learning points for Wales



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Foreword

As Chair of the ColegauCymru International Group, it gives me great pleasure to present this research report as an example of the Further Education (FE) sector's commitment to building purposeful partnerships overseas and learning from global best practice. The report shows how the findings and insights from overseas visits, such as the one undertaken to Finland as part of this Taith Pathway 2 project, can inform policy in Wales and champion an FE sector with a global outlook.

The project brought together participants from ColegauCymru, FE colleges, Welsh Government, and Medr. This collective expertise, led by two committed and professional researchers, has enabled us to gather valuable insights and foster meaningful discussions with partners in Finland as well as here in Wales.

As we move forward, the report and the findings from Finland will be shared with a wider audience to maximise the impact of the project's activities and will support the sector in achieving some of the international ambitions outlined in its Internationalisation Strategy. Ongoing government investment in international education activities is critical – supporting educational innovation through Welsh-led international collaborative partnerships

We are confident that the insights gained will play an important role in shaping the future of the post 16 sector in Wales.

Andrew Cornish, ColegauCymru International Group Chair and Principal of Coleg Sir Gâr/Coleg Ceredigion

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1. Executive Summary

Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Finland has a strong reputation both domestically and internationally. The strength of the Finnish VET system is the result of significant reform undertaken since 2017. Like Wales, Finland is in the process of responding to many global challenges related to an ageing demography, rapidly changing workplaces, and the societal impact of technological change. Finland aimed to develop an agile VET system able to respond to and shape such changes. At the heart of the strategic reform were large scale changes to the qualifications system and individualised pathways for learners (apprentices and students) of all ages. Both of these have been long-term policy aspirations in Wales.

With the publication of the Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales and the establishment of a reformed tertiary system, ColegauCymru undertook a review of the Finnish VET system to understand what could be learned in Wales.

Following a literature review of over 150 documents, and a three-day fieldwork visit to Helsinki to meet policymakers, stakeholder agencies, and VET providers, this report aims to synthesise our learning from this process and the implications for the development of VET in Wales. We argue that Finnish VET is characterised by six 'design principles':

- a comprehensive and continuous system
- contemporary data and analysis
- clear attractive pathways
- choice for individuals based on lifelong guidance
- competence-based and flexible
- competent and trusted providers

These principles are used as a basis for describing the Finnish VET system and what the literature and stakeholders told us about its effectiveness.

Then, we apply the same principles to the VET context in Wales to see how our system fares under the same analysis. This comparative examination provides the basis for six high level recommendations:

1. Welsh Government should develop a vocational education and training strategy.
2. Welsh Government should develop national skills anticipation planning.
3. Medr should develop funding approaches that enable funding flexibility and consistency for VET providers.
4. Qualifications Wales should engage with the VET sector to explore the transferability of a competence points system for Wales.
5. Careers Wales should work with VET providers to cost the development of a system of individualised vocational planning and support.

6. Medr should continue to prioritise professional learning for the FE sector.

A key learning point from this project has been the cohesiveness of the Finnish VET system coupled with an agility for 'moving freely'. This has been achieved by a clear strategic approach to VET that is long-term, is based on a clear analysis of its operating environment, and links with other parts of government. All these elements are part of a strategic approach where government takes responsibility for the many actors involved in VET delivery. In this context, providers are part of a mature system with strong governance arrangements and financial management systems. This piece of work is a timely reminder that the top recommendation from the Welsh Government's own Vocational Qualifications Review in 2023 was for a national strategy for vocational education and training. This strategy is urgently needed. Anything less would be insufficient in coordinating the many 'moving parts' of the VET system in Wales, where no single agency holds overarching control. The strategy will offer us an opportunity to clearly articulate Wales' ambitions for what vocational education and training can deliver for Wales. It is now time for meaningful action to deliver a solution needed by both learners and employers alike.

The report has been written as a standalone document with sources hyperlinked in the text. Supporting material and a full bibliography from the desk-based evidence review are available online.

2. Introduction

2.1 Background to the Project

This report takes its title from an interior design exhibition visited during the fieldwork phase of this Taith-funded project. A group of VET professionals (college leaders, government officials, researchers and ColegauCymru staff) were on a three-day trip to Helsinki. With an hour to fill before our bus to the airport, some of us went to the renowned Design Museum, which was showing 'Strategies for Moving Freely'. The work of Jenny Nordberg brings well-researched design to focus on the changing needs of a society that is moving beyond unsustainable mass-production. For the two project researchers, with many hours of interviews, site visits and reports to process, the title seemed to reflect much of what we had learnt.

The high-performing Finnish VET system is carefully designed to be flexible and agile in its response to a changing world. There seem to be strategies in place for moving freely.

The impetus behind this project was to learn from Finland at a time when Wales is undergoing significant change in the organisation and funding of tertiary education. Although one country's approach is not directly transferable to another context, parts of the system could

be adopted. The focus was on how Finland's 2018 VET policy reform has played out in practice, particularly in terms of:

- a strategic overview of how VET is regulated and quality assured
- how the qualification system operates in Finland
- how the recommendations of the qualifications review could be taken forward in Wales

During the project's timescale Welsh Government published its [strategic priorities](#) for Medr and its response to the independent [Review of Vocational Qualifications](#) led by Sharon Lusher. This report responds to some of the points raised in these documents.

2.2 Our Approach

The project team undertook a desk-based thematic review of published evidence as the basis for a three-day fieldwork visit to the Helsinki region in April 2024. The themes explored were: skills anticipation; lifetime careers guidance; the role of VET providers; and, the VET workforce.

The fieldwork visit was attended by nine senior leaders from Welsh further education colleges, two Welsh Government officials, four staff from ColegauCymru, and two independent researchers. The researchers prepared a briefing for all attendees, including areas for investigation, and ran a debrief session to gather perspectives from attendees. The group visited the Finnish National Agency for Education, Skills Finland, and two large VET providers (one mainstream, one specialist). We also met with leaders from Finland's membership organisation for VET providers, AMKE, and a representative of the Estonian government.

2.3 Finland-Wales: A Valid Comparison

Although a case study approach is useful in allowing us to look at one system through the lens of another, Finland and Wales are not the same in many respects. For example, Finland has higher GDP per capita, a greater landmass, and is part of a large trading and political bloc, the European Union. Another aspect of Finland's geo-political situation is that it shares a border with Russia and is a member of NATO. [Conscription](#) exists in Finland, which potentially affects labour market (and educational) participation for those aged between 18 and 60.

Wales, as part of the UK, has a land border with a larger market for labour and some aspects of education. Not all VET-related policy is devolved and this can create tensions with the UK that present challenges to education providers and a 'fragmented sector' in Wales (as one [recent report](#) termed it) for businesses to engage with.

Despite these differences, Finland and Wales have relatively small, ageing, populations, with an uneven spread across urban and rural areas. In common with most countries in Europe,

both face similar demographic, environmental, global, and workplace transformation challenges.

These challenges provide the starting point for the Finnish Government's analysis of what education should look like in 2040. The *Education Policy Report of the Finnish Government* (2021) outlines seven interlinked 'key drivers' for change, all of which will be familiar to educationalists in Wales. The strength of this approach is that it couches educational policy within the country's wider social and economic context and shows how VET can also contribute to positive change.

2.4 The Rationale for VET Reform in Finland

In common with Wales, Finland faces a significant demographic challenge. Finland has an ageing population with significant regional variance. Cities are 'younger' than rural areas, partly due to the presence of campuses and the type of work available. Inward migration (due to refugee crises *and* the need to attract skilled labour) is also clustered around urban areas, where there will be an increasing need to support Finnish and/or Swedish language skills. The reduction in the 'working age population' (16-64 years) means migrants will be required to fill job vacancies unless adults in the labour market defer retirement. Most 2040 Finnish workers (75%) are already in the labour market, indicating the need to focus resource on continuous workplace learning. The decline in the 16-24 age cohort in some areas will lead to unviable VET providers unless they revise delivery methods (towards more flexible non-placed based learning). It is anticipated that higher education enrolments will stay the same until 2035 before decreasing.

Finnish education policy also acknowledges the presence of persistent inequalities in their system. There are a number of categories here: 'family background' ('social status' / class); 'gender segregation'; disabilities; high student exclusion rates (including post-16); high levels of youth unemployment; and inward migrants having less 'social status'. (The terms 'race' or 'ethnicity' are not used in the analysis.) Such inequalities are seen as leading social immobility, limiting the ability of talent to progress. Those young people with lower 'social status' and most boys (54%) tend to choose the VET route. Girls perform better at school and about two-thirds (65%) choose the academic route leading to greater 'gender segregation' across business sectors. Disabled and excluded young people need multi-agency support (including 'counsellors') to support their learning, either in mainstream institutions or separately. Language support in Finnish and/or Swedish is seen as important in addressing the challenges faced by migrants to progress in education and the labour market.

Technological advances will drive the Finnish economy and its education system to 2040. The digitalisation of the economy, public services, and society as whole will transform the way education providers prepare people for work and further learning. Data proliferation and artificial intelligence will present challenges and opportunities for VET providers. There will

be greater access to student data, with possible opportunities to ‘commercialise’ datasets. But there will also be significant workforce development issues (and not just for digital learning teachers). For post-16 providers low ‘multi-literacy and computational skills’ (25% <L1) at school mean students need input as part of VET provision. For adults outside the labour market, there are inequalities in access to data and hardware.

One of the anticipated changes resulting from increased digitalisation in Finland is the ability to individualise learning to higher levels. Technological advances (hardware, data, connectivity in rural areas) will enable more flexible and individual learning and assessment. Digitalisation should reduce boundaries: institutional (between VET providers); sectoral (education/business); and, internationally (in terms of research, development and innovation). At the provider level, there will be a speeding-up of routine tasks, but new ethical issues will emerge such as ownership of data and meta-data.

While society and VET providers change in Finland, so will businesses and workplaces. The transformation of work will be partly linked to digitalisation and data advances, ‘automation and robotisation’ in some sectors, and high innovation rates in goods production. There is also the increase—possibly temporary—of hybrid working since the pandemic. Workplaces will continue to demand higher level skills, transferable and digital skills.

Finland anticipates greater vertical integration of businesses providing goods and services (for example production and retail), changing the nature of skills required in the ‘merged’ business. However, workplaces will change at different rates according to the nature of the regional economies and their demography. This could result in ‘bottlenecks of labour availability’, where skills are available in the wrong location.

Such changes, according to the Finnish analysis, ‘challenge both qualification contents and our conventional thinking about qualifications and qualification structures’. More specifically, there will be the need for ‘different [and higher] competence areas’ to meet new job roles being created. Another implication of fast-changing business sectors is the importance of skills anticipation and how the findings of such exercises are used. Predicting changing skills needs is worthless unless you apply the knowledge quickly to influence programme design and how it’s assessed. Indeed, the concept of what constitutes on-the-job training could itself change.

Some of the environmental challenges that Finland faces are related to factors such as an erosion of trust in democracy, the perception of a democratic deficit particularly among young people who ‘lack the interest in ... active participation’. To address this, the Finnish Government argues ‘VET should support students’ growth into active members of society’, not least because active participation is linked to confidence and other transferable skills that students gain on VET programmes. Some of these wider societal challenges are directly linked to climate change and the needs for more sustainable ways of working for VET providers as organisations as well as the curriculum delivered. The rapid need for renewables and low-

emission technologies will affect Finnish business sectors unequally so VET providers will need a differentiated approach.

An opportunity created by Finland’s response to its environmental challenges will be about ‘creating markets for Finnish know-how’ in the global context. Finland will invest more investment in research, development and innovation on both climate change mitigation *and* adaptation to change. Climate change is likely to create further inward migration to Finland that will impact the provision of language skills and other support.

Finnish VET is situated with an international and global market that is itself a driver for change. There is an interdependence between nations as they innovate and develop new products. VET providers are part of the ‘internationalisation of science and education’ and will need to partner in transnational projects, exchanges (opportunities to study and work abroad), and joint product development. Involvement in international competitions such as World Skills are seen as an integral part of this.

Overall, one conclusion from the Finnish analysis is not so much that ‘change happens’ but how the pace of change affects the education system as a whole:

The transformation of work and the speed at which this change takes place will challenge the entire education system from the qualification system, qualifications and degrees and composition of qualifications to curricula, learning environments, modes of learning and the teacher’s identity.

Source: [*Education Policy Report of the Finnish Government \(2021\)*](#)

Both the amount of change and the speed at which it occurs were the central drivers for the reform of the Finnish VET system from 2018.

During our fieldwork visit, policymakers presented these drivers for change alongside the perceived shortcomings of the previous VET system and an environment of increasingly constrained public finances. In short, the aim of VET reform in Finland was to achieve both greater effectiveness and efficiency.

<p><i>Working life is undergoing changes.</i></p> <p><i>New occupations keep on emerging and old ones disappear.</i></p> <p><i>Technology advances.</i></p>	<p><i>We need competences that meet the changing needs of working life.</i></p>
<p><i>Students’ needs are becoming more and more individualistic.</i></p> <p><i>Skills need to be updated throughout careers.</i></p>	<p><i>We require solutions that meet students’ needs.</i></p>

<p>16 percent of the age cohort fails to complete secondary education.</p> <p>Regional, socio-economic and gender disparities have all become more noticeable in education. →</p>	<p>A study place must be guaranteed for all comprehensive school graduates.</p>
<p>Economic growth is weak. Unemployment is high. →</p> <p>Public finances need to be rebalanced.</p>	<p>A more efficient allocation of educational resources is a must.</p>

Source: *Presentation by Finnish National Agency for Education, EDUFI April 2024*

3. Vocational Education and Training in Finland

3.1 Policy and Strategy

In common with most countries Finland faces public funding constraints. In the Finnish context, an ageing population puts severe pressure on welfare funding linked to high interest rates. The current Programme for Government, *A Strong Committed Finland* (2023), outlines the funding settlement for all government departments. There is a link between VET and vocational rehabilitation, international recruitment of labour (including VET study modules in English and recognition of prior learning undertaken in other countries,) the importance of preparatory education (including part-time courses), and even preparation for the Olympics.

The section dedicated to VET recognises the success of the post-2018 reforms in particular in terms of personalisation of learning and the expansion of on-the-job training. But further work needs to be done on transitions from IVET to the workplace or further learning and completion rates. This will be achieved by incentivising ‘performance’ and ‘effectiveness’ (see 3.2 below). Other measures include the use of microcredentials for those already in the workplace.

The Government will allow VET providers to offer their education and training that leads to a qualification in the form of commissioned education to people the same way it is done in tertiary education. Commissioned education can be used to address skills shortages when education and training to complete a qualification can be placed on the market.

Source: *Publications of the Finnish Government 2023:60*

The strategic approach is based on long-term planning. The *Education Policy Report of the Finnish Government* (2021) looks forward to the year 2040 in its assessment of the drivers for change and, critically, how education can both respond to and shape change. The *Ministry of Education and Culture’s Strategy 2030* (2019) situates VET within a lifelong learning approach

(from early years to university level, embracing youth work, science and the arts etc). Education has a role that encompasses social cohesion, democratic engagement, alongside skills for working life. The acquisition of 'competences' promoted alongside 'creative, inquiry-based and responsible action that renews society' and equality of opportunity.

VET reform legislation (2017) outlines the following objectives of VET in Finland:

- increase and maintain competence in the population
- provide opportunities for demonstrating competence irrespective of how it was acquired
- develop working life and businesses and respond to their skills needs
- promote employment
- foster entrepreneurial capabilities
- support the continuous ability to work and maintain functional capacity
- support lifelong learning and professional growth
- promote the completion of vocational qualifications or qualification units
- help students grow into decent well-rounded and education human beings and members of society
- provide [students] with the knowledge and skills required for engaging in further studies, occupational development and leisure activities
- further [students'] versatile personal development

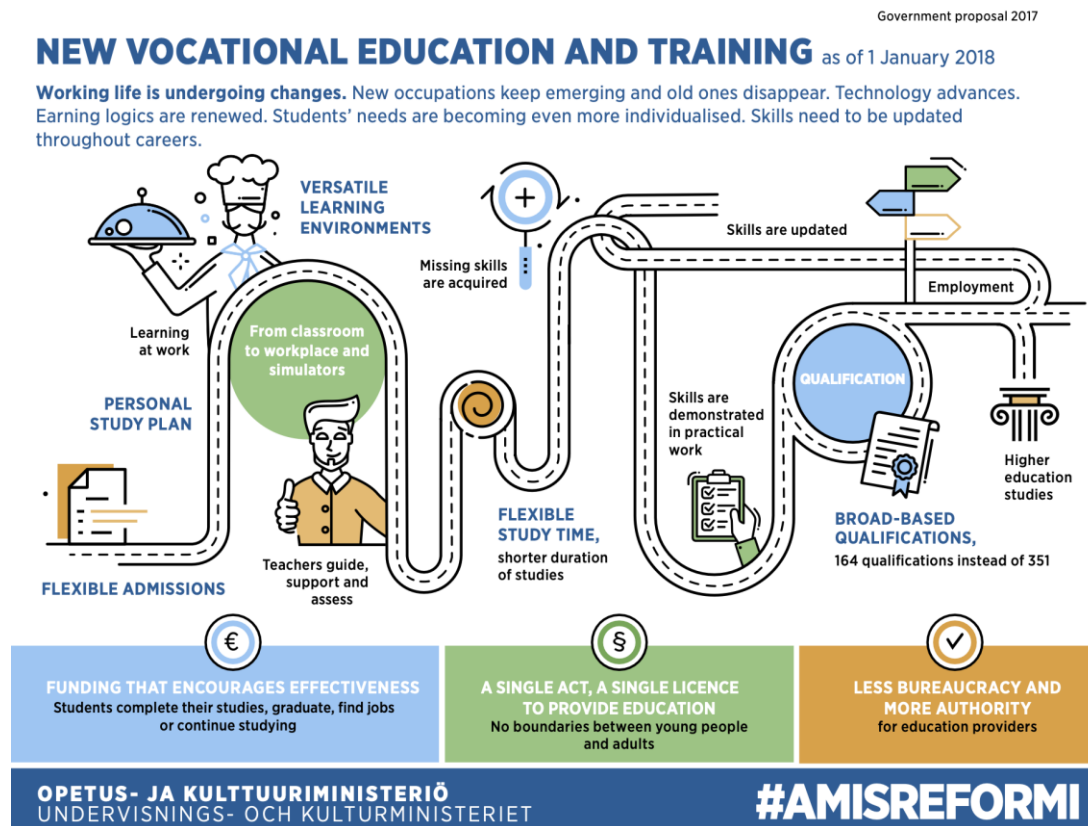
Source: [Act on Vocational Education and Training \(531/2017. Section 2\)](#)

The reform process undertaken in Finland since 2017 is seen as inclusive of employers, providers and practitioners, involving 1500 of them in its development. The result was presented by [EDUFI](#) as 'the biggest educational reform in two decades.' The main changes were to the qualification system, significantly reducing the number of qualifications and, critically, the need to add to them as new competences are required in the workplace. Designing the system around 'competence points' and a 'personal competence development plan' for individuals was seen as introducing more 'flexibility' into the system. Competence would be assessed in the workplace with more training undertaken in those settings. Such flexibility would also be extended to access ('year-round admissions') and 'versatile' teachers designing individual learning pathways. For VET providers, more responsibility would be accompanied by greater freedom:

The proposal aims to lessen bureaucracy. All vocational education and training would in future be governed by a single license to provide education. Education providers would have more freedom in deciding how they wish to organise the education they provide. The new legislation would reduce overlaps in the administration and planning, which would free up principals' and teachers' time from administrative duties to teaching. The processes of skills acquisition and demonstration would be streamlined.

Source: [EDUFI \(2017\)](#)

The policy aspiration was summarised in the following diagram.



Source: [EDUFI \(2017\)](#)

3.2 Funding and Financing of Finnish VET

The funding of VET in Finland is enshrined in separate legislation, the Act on the Financing of Education and Culture (not currently available in English). Since the 2018 reform of the VET system, the funding model has continued to evolve. However, there are three main elements to public funding:

- Core funding (currently 70% of the total) based on 'student years' and enabling a firm foundation upon which for providers to plan provision
- Performance funding (currently 20% of the total) is intended to incentivise the achievement of units and completion of qualifications, intensify study to achieve efficiencies in the system
- Effectiveness funding (currently 10% of the total) is based on progression to further learning or employment, and certain workplace outcomes. It is designed to 'redirect funding to fields where [skills] are needed'

Essentially it is similar to a 'logic chain' or 'theory of change' model, where core funding supports activity, performance funding supports outputs, and effectiveness funding supports outcomes.

Of this total public funding for VET providers 4% can be used for strategic planning at the provider level. Funding is differentiated by qualification group, the expected length of learning programme, IVET or CVET, and/or the need for additional support.

The relative percentages of these three elements have changed since 2018 and are due to change again in 2026. The percentage of the total that is core funding will decrease to 50%. Performance funding will increase to 30% of the total. Effectiveness funding will increase to 20% of the total, indicating a move towards investing more heavily in the outcomes of learning as well as competence. Differential levels of performance across the provider base have led to government increasing incentives to complete units and qualifications more quickly.

3.3 How VET is Organised in Finland

Finland has a 'two-tier structure' for education:

The Ministry of Education and Culture is the highest authority and is responsible for all publicly funded education in Finland. The Ministry is responsible for preparing educational legislation, all necessary decisions and its share of the state budget for the Government.

The Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) is the national development agency responsible for early childhood education and care, pre-primary, basic, general and vocational upper secondary education as well as for adult education and training. Higher education is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Culture.

Source: [Finnish National Agency for Education EDUFI website](#)

The separation of VET reform from higher education is something that will be explored later as it has particular relevance to the tertiary approach under Medr.

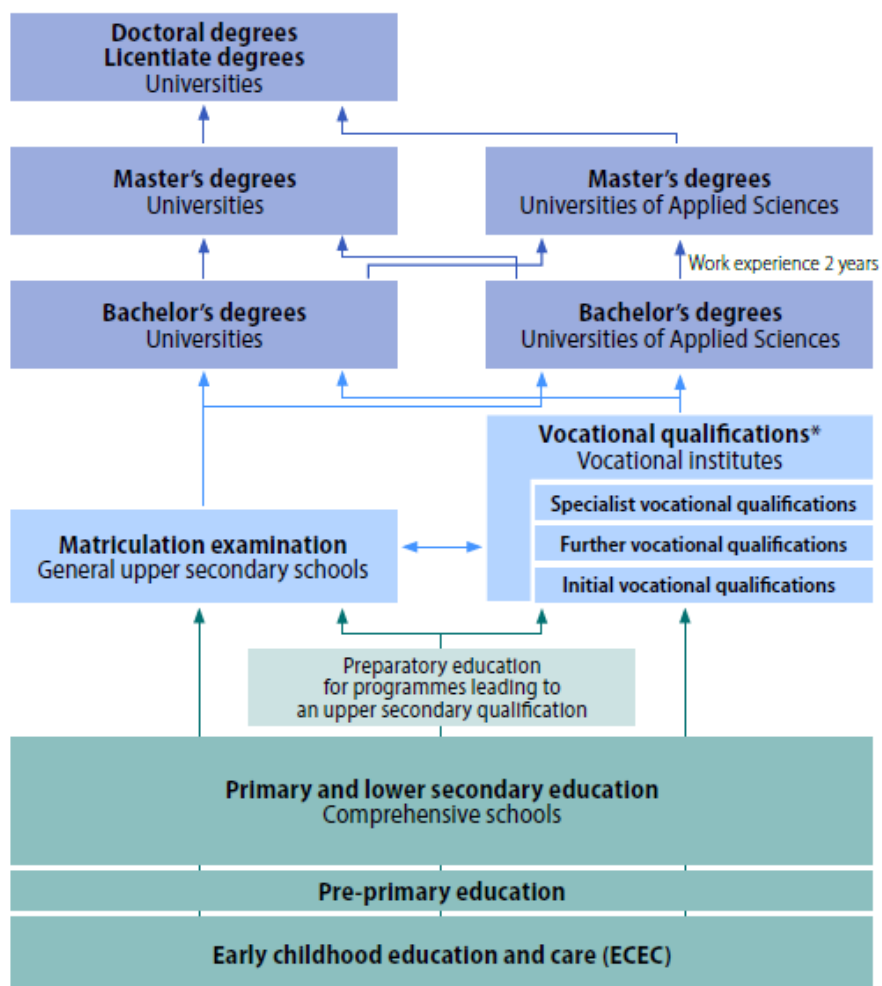
In common with many European countries, the Finnish government presents its vocational pathways alongside 'general' or academic ones. Diagrammatically this has the virtue of presenting the pathways as having parity of esteem (measured by qualification level) and interlinking so that individuals can cross pathways, for example, between VET and general upper secondary education, or universities and universities of applied sciences.

In terms of young people completing primary and lower-secondary education, approximately 99% immediately continue their studies in general upper secondary education, VET or

voluntary additional primary and lower-secondary education. In 2021 the minimum ‘school leaving age’ was raised to 18 years. Therefore, the number of students enrolling in initial VET increased. Currently around 41% of learners who completed primary and lower-secondary education enrol in initial VET immediately after, above the OECD average (37%).

At this stage of education, there are no charges to students, who are also entitled to a free meal and transport subsidies. Another attractive quality of the Finnish system is the continuous application cycle, which allows individuals to progress at any time of the year. The stated aspiration of the Finnish system is to have ‘no dead ends’.

VET is a key element of the overall education and training framework for Finland, with clear vocational and academic progression routes that are presented as intersecting.



Source: *Finnish VET in a Nutshell*

Uptake by adults is high with [2022 data](#) showing that approximately 50% of VET students are adults, including both those looking to upskill or reskill and those undertaking further qualifications in their current fields.

For adults studying at a higher or a specialist level, there might be a ‘reasonable’ fee, and the opportunity to receive a bursary or take out a loan. Other ‘attractive’ features of VET,

according to [Finnish VET in a Nutshell](#) are that vocational education is ‘highly regarded’ in Finland due to its perceived workplace relevance, the opportunity to learn at work, to gain competences linked to a personal plan, ‘strong employment prospects’, and for younger adults to take part of skills competitions locally, nationally, and internationally (through WorldSkills and the [Abilympics](#)).

Preparatory pathways were particularly important to students with additional needs at one of the VET providers visited. [Luovi](#) offers both the TUVA (preparatory education for upper secondary education) and TELMA (preparatory education for work and independent living). TELMA is the route into VET with vocational skills provided alongside wider life skills.

According to [CEDEFOP](#) 78 vocational institutes delivered 85% of IVET in 2023, reaching almost 284,000 students. Vocational adult education centres are a significant provider of further VET, but marginal providers of IVET. Other providers (including specialist providers) account for less than 10% of IVET students. All VET qualifications can also be obtained through apprenticeship training. Approximately 19% of IVET students receive their training via an apprenticeship. Alongside this broad provider base, the VET system includes private training providers and universities of applied sciences ([UAS](#)).

UAS are similar to a ‘polytechnic’ model which focusses on training for and in the workplace, whereas universities in Finland are ‘research-driven’. [Recent data](#) shows there are just under 180,000 students at the twenty-five UAS in Finland, only five of which have more than 10,000 students. Entry requirements for UAS tend to be less demanding than Finnish universities and RPL is used to recognise workplace competence as entry for masters programmes.

The Finnish Government’s [2022 data](#) shows that there were over 281,364 students enrolled in upper-secondary VET in Finland. Although participation is lower post-pandemic, the Finnish system is seen as being ‘resilient’ to shocks like Covid-19. Research by Omnia Education Partnerships, published by [UNESCO in 2021](#), highlighted the benefits of the flexibility of the Finnish VET system:

- **Resilient:** Finnish VET adapted quickly to the pandemic by transitioning to distance learning, leveraging existing digital skills and infrastructure.
- **Flexible Learning:** The system’s flexibility, including modular learning paths and competency-based assessments, allowed for continued education despite disruptions.
- **Support for Students:** Efforts were made to ensure students, especially those with special needs, received adequate support and could continue their studies.
- **Work-Based Learning:** Although some sectors faced challenges, many companies continued to offer apprenticeships and work-based learning opportunities

Source: [Case Study on Finnish TVET—a resilient model of training during Covid-19](#)

An [analysis](#) by the National Agency showed that VET institutions quickly transitioned to distance learning, however, while this shift was technically successful, it posed challenges for sectors that require hands-on training. [Research published in 2023](#) identified that teachers and students had to rapidly enhance their digital skills. This period saw the development of new digital pedagogies and co-teaching innovations becoming important parts of VET.

3.4 Skills Anticipation in Finland

Skills anticipation is enshrined in legislation as the responsibility of providers:

VET providers shall seek to anticipate skills needs arising in their respective regions, with a view to the labour needs and demographic trends in their area of operation.

Source: [Act on Vocational Education and Training \(531/2017. Section 125\)](#)

However, government agencies have a clearly defined role in supporting the process. Analysis of skills shortages and gaps is a central element of Finland's current *Programme for Government*. Due to the pace of change, a systematic approach to 'skills anticipation' has been adopted. The aims of the Finnish skills anticipation system are:

- to prepare forecasts concerning economic growth and employment
- to anticipate the medium- and long-term demand and availability of the workforce
- to anticipate developments in the occupational structure
- to anticipate the educational needs of the workforce
- to estimate the national and regional provision of education places for young people
- to ensure that young people have access to vocationally/professionally-oriented education and training

Source: [CEDEFOP Skills Anticipation in Finland 2023 Update](#)

A [National Forum for Skills Anticipation](#) consists of a steering group, nine anticipation groups representing different sectors, networks of experts, representatives of employers and entrepreneurs, employees, teaching staff (VET and higher education), VET providers and higher education institutions, research and educational administration bodies.

As well as sectoral differences, geographical issues are also brought into play alongside intelligence from employer surveys, skills assessments and skills forecasting. Stakeholder engagement, including involvement from trade unions and education institutions is reported to be high.

Anticipation groups



Source: Packalen, P. (2023) [National Forum for Skills Anticipation](#)

Complementing the activities of the National Forum and also operating under the auspices of Finnish National Agency for Education, the Service Centre for Continuous Learning and Employment ([SECLE](#)) plays a crucial role in enhancing the skills and competencies of the working-age population. Its main functions include:

- analysing the competence and labour market needs of working life
- financing education and training for working-age individuals
- developing information, advisory, and guidance services
- supporting regional and other forms of cooperation
- participating in the development of a digital service package for continuous learning

Source: *The Service Centre for Continuous Learning and Employment (jotpa.fi)*

SECLE has also taken on a leadership role in the implementation of the [European Year of Skills in Finland](#) (May 2023 – May 2024) indicating a link between skills anticipation activity and a wider strategic role.

[Recent insights](#) (December 2023) into skills anticipation activities in Finland highlight the significant influences of socioeconomic factors including recession, the COVID pandemic and demographic factors, such as decreasing numbers in the labour force and an ageing population. The 2023 analysis focusses on the supply side of meeting labour market needs and signposts the importance of a more comprehensive approach. This should be underpinned by increased feedback from different levels of government, stakeholders

including employers, chambers of commerce and education institutions and their students. Since 2018 post-16 education providers have had increased responsibility for reflecting outcomes from anticipatory analyses as operational targeting and steering powers have been devolved to universities, universities of applied sciences (UAS) and VET providers.

The core tools of skills anticipation in Finland are the VATTAGE and MITENNA models. The VATTAGE model provides economic forecasts, while MITENNA focuses on education needs and future-oriented development. Outputs from the VATTAGE model regarding future skills needs feed into MITENNA articulates the education and training provision necessary to meet forecasted demand.

Local and regional authorities use the analyses to inform the implementation of central government policy, intermediaries to advise young people entering the labour market or further and higher education, and researchers to inform their analyses of specific regions, sectors or occupations. In addition to VATTAGE and MITENNA, qualitative anticipation models also exist.

These sector-based assessments take advantage of the anticipation model developed by the National Projects on Anticipation of National Competences and Skills Needs (VOSE). VOSE projects are sector-specific foresight projects with representatives of business, education and research and are used for curriculum planning for VET provision.

The Finnish skills anticipation models underwent recent (December 2023) scrutiny by [CEDEFOP](#). The need to make improvements to both short- and medium-term anticipation models was highlighted including a more granular analysis of how different segments of the labour supply can respond to future demand for skills. The need to invest in resources to strengthen long term forecasting is also seen as a significant priority.

Increased momentum for more refined skills anticipation activities is reported particularly at the regional level through the Regional Councils, public employment service centres, with VET providers and HE institutions also playing important roles.

The key aspect for Finnish stakeholders was the use of contemporary data. A competence-based system is dependent on the ability to update competences as workplaces and skills requirements (often within occupations) change.

3.5 How Finnish VET is Regarded

Although Finland's VET reforms are relatively recent, there are a number of studies published in Finland and internationally. Generally Finnish VET is well-regarded internationally. However, there are specific challenges raised in the research literature.

[CEDEFOP's 2023 National Policy Brief](#) highlights specific contemporary issues for Finnish VET: rapidly evolving skills needs; demographic changes; underused digitalisation potential; and, significant gender segregation and inequality in education.

[Eurydice's 2024 Report](#) looking at upper secondary VET specifically revealed similar challenges:

- **Demographic Changes:** The diminishing age groups in primary and lower-secondary education will lead to fewer students in upper secondary education, requiring adaptation and development of the educational network
- **Accessibility:** Ensuring high standards of teaching and versatile services for all students, despite demographic shifts, will be challenging.
- **Utilisation of ICT:** Leveraging information and communication technology, distance learning, and cooperation between education providers will be essential to meet future needs

A review of the VET reforms undertaken by Finland's National Audit Office (February 2021) notes, that although VET reform has progressed in line with its goals:

- the low starting point has been reflected in implementation challenges due a fast schedule and a constrained funding environment
- problems in 'working life cooperation' (partnerships with employers) could create a crisis in VET
- funding should encourage the use of smaller parts of units (microcredentials)
- funding criteria on VET 'effectiveness' are not sufficiently transparent

One [2020 study](#), including the context of VET, challenges that, perhaps counter-intuitively to much described within this report, the notion that Finnish policy development is characterised by thoughtful, slow processes of consideration of the nature and effects of reform. Instead, the authors suggest that the paradox of 'fast-policy' is in play in Finland. This is hinted in the National Audit Office report signposted above and it is notable that fast policy features effects include intensification and fragmentation of educational reform processes, increased individualisation and decontextualisation of the educational reform agenda, and a trend towards increased instability, privatisation and reduction in funding for educational provision.

In the wider context of evaluating VET systems, it is worth noting that the OECD has recently introduced an [updated evidence based approach](#) based on PISA-VET. The assessment will focus on key competencies needed for the labour market, including problem-solving, teamwork, and digital skills. It will also consider the context in which VET is delivered, such as the quality of teaching.

The goal is to create a robust framework that can be used to improve VET policies and practices worldwide. The model is intended to provide detailed insights into the effectiveness of VET systems, PISA-VET aims to support policymakers in making informed decisions to enhance the quality and relevance of vocational education and learning environments.

An OECD report '[Getting Skills Right: Continuous Learning in Working Life in Finland](#)' (2020) highlights the success of the skills system in the context of top performing PISA scores for 15-

year-olds and adults with high levels of literacy and numeracy. One in two adults participate in job related activities annually, however participation is uneven with participation low for adults with low skills, the long term unemployed and older adults.

The OECD's analysis identifies the need for the Finnish skills system to adapt to changing job needs as a result of globalisation, changes in technology and an ageing population. The implications of growing shortages in higher level skills are also explored. One possible reason for the excellence of Finnish VET is that students are well-prepared in the basic education phase (pre-16).

One of the challenges recognised in the Finnish skills system is what Kennedy referred to as 'if at first you don't succeed, you don't succeed'. Poor levels of basic skills can impact on VET participation. [2023 research](#) provides a positive synthesis of the 2018 reforms, but also argues that the literacy curriculum in VET is realised as a reductionist 'literacy for labour', which may have negative implications for how basic skills are valued and taught in VET programmes.

The academic and vocational divide in Finland is explored in [2021 research](#) through examining the backgrounds, choices, and study experiences of higher education (HE) students in Finland who have entered HE via the vocational route. The narrative highlights the differences between these students and those who have entered through the academic track. The study concludes that the institutional 'habitus' of vocational institutions has an impact on students' choices and outcomes in HE. Furthermore, the choice of HE based on 'belonging' or the feeling that a particular institution or study programme is for 'people like us' can be problematic. The research suggests that the vocational route to HE is possible in Finland, but it is often delayed and requires strategic utilisation of different entry routes.

One major concern is the dropout rate from VET programs, especially among young people in Finland. A [large-scale longitudinal study](#) in a large VET provider from 2014–21 highlights the importance of acquiring skills for life-long learning and the crucial importance of students' potential for self-regulation to respond positively to rapid changes in the nature of work. In the context of VET programmes in general, and in Finland specifically, this research recommended providing greater support for students in enhancing their abilities to engage with independent learning, personalised programmes and the demands of workplace learning.

The implications of VET students' self-regulation is also explored, and reframed as 'self-governing' in a [smaller, qualitative study](#) (2019). The interplay between teacher support and the promotion of individualisation is still seen as crucial but an overemphasis on the latter can negatively affect student outcomes. The study also highlights the need for a more inclusive and supportive pedagogical practice that takes into account the diverse needs of students.

The [2019 OECD paper](#) distinguishes differences between formal, non-formal, and informal training. Informal learning is the most common form of job-related learning at work in Finland. The paper highlights the relevance of identifying and recognising such learning. It suggests that impacts come from giving workers more opportunities to turn what they learn into immediate use because of the increased flexibility in organising their work. There are clear implications of such discussions for the positioning of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Finnish VET (see section 3.7)

The implication of rapidly changing job markets is explored in [2023 research](#) alongside the worker-citizen concept at the heart of the Finnish VET reforms. The article argues the ideals of vocational education, as framed in the 2018 reforms, may need to be reshaped within the increasingly unpredictable realities of new adulthood.

Inclusion is covered by a small scale [2022 study](#) which explores supporting legislation and the positioning of additional support in the 2018 reforms. More attention should be paid to the social and subjective domains of VET. Socialisation is a key role for VET, particularly at the IVET stage. This was explored further in a [2021 study](#) which examines the importance of societal belonging and VET as facilitating transition into working life. The research emphasises that the ideal of the 'worker-citizen' has a strong influence on vocational students' sense of belonging and capability to participate in society, through their expectations of finding employment. The study concludes that VET should acknowledge the various meanings of social relationships and power relationships that reinforce the feeling of societal acceptance and enhance young people's sense of societal belonging. The study also highlights the importance of supporting vocational students' actual potential to find paid employment and ensuring a threshold level of social equality among students.

Similar concepts were explored in [2020 research](#) that examined how a vocational training programme in Finland for students with learning disabilities, shaped their understanding of citizenship and employability.

Further insights into the relevance of identity is explored in [2022 research](#) with privileged, high-achieving students. These cohorts favoured extracurricular activities and associated qualifications and learned distinctive values, preferences, and behaviours. The research focusses on the development of cultural capital and professional identity, including instrumental skills such as leadership linked to membership in the professional middle class. Gendered implications are also explored. For example, female participants learned to adjust to masculine business culture and developed aspirations towards prestigious job positions.

Multiculturalism is explored in a [2022 study](#). It argues the notion was inherent in the 2018 VET reform, via three themes: individualisation, competition, and shared responsibility. The authors see multiculturalism as a critical challenge for Finnish education and working life, but

it is unclear whether the 2018 VET reform will resolve the dilemmas and contradictions connected with multiculturalism. Crucially, the findings suggest that VET policy experts understand multiculturalism narrowly as 'synonymous with immigration'. There are implications as to how core competences within VET qualifications are defined.

The [evaluation of the Finnish VET qualification system](#) undertaken by FINEEC and published in February 2024 includes the headline that vocational education and training in Finland continues to be highly regarded, with 90% of Finns believing it offers high-quality learning. The analysis however does illustrate the persistence of other issues identified from the 2017 survey including: challenges in using skills anticipation information, engaging stakeholders, developing different qualification types, and assuring the quality and consistency of the qualification requirements. Other emerging issues include reflecting that the highest dropout rate in Finland is in the age group 20–24 and that Finnish VET graduates have the lowest employment rate in the Nordic region.

3.6 Curriculum, Qualifications and Accreditation in Finnish VET

Three Broad Qualification Groups exist in Finnish VET with relatively small numbers of qualifications at each level ([EDUFI April 2024](#))

1. **Initial Vocational Upper Secondary:** For young learners. 42 Vocational qualifications indicate competence to enter employment in the field. (EQF level 4)
2. **Further Vocational:** For those seeking additional expertise. 64 Further vocational qualifications indicate the vocational skills required of skilled workers in the field. (EQF level 4)
3. **Specialist Vocational:** For specialized skills. 54 Specialist vocational qualifications indicate a command of the most demanding tasks in the field. (EQF level 5)

The qualification system is modularised. Initial qualifications include common units (communication, mathematics, science, citizenship) and vocational units. Further and specialist qualifications consist entirely of vocational units, which can be mandatory or optional, offering flexibility to meet individual needs. Vocational qualifications include more than 3000 modules/units/micro credentials of learning outcomes. [Competence requirements](#) and assessment criteria exist for each module.

In Finland, vocational qualifications are structured with specific competence points:

- **Vocational Upper Secondary Qualification:** This qualification includes 180 competence points
- **Further Vocational Qualification:** This qualification can include either 150 or 120 competence points.
- **Specialist Vocational Qualification:** This qualification includes 180 competence points.

VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

Vocational modules 145 competence points

Compulsory modules

Optional modules

Common modules 35 competence points

Communication and interaction competence

Mathematical and scientific competence

Citizenship and working life competence

FURTHER VQ, SPECIALIST VQ

Vocational modules

Compulsory modules

Optional modules

Source: *Presentation by Finnish National Agency for Education, EDUFI April 2024*

Common modules (35 competence points)

Communication and interaction competence

min 11 competence points

- Mother tongue
- Other domestic language
- Foreign language
- Working in digital environment
- Art and creative expression

Mathematical and scientific competence

min 6 competence points

- Mathematics and applying mathematics
- Physics and chemistry and applying physics and chemistry

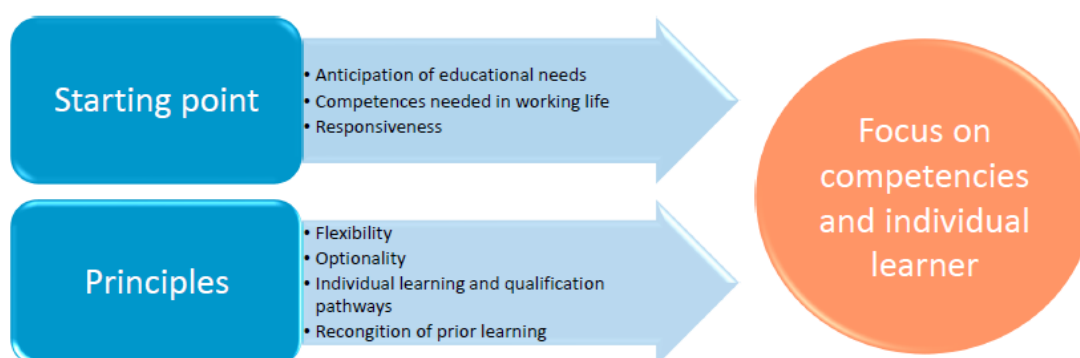
Citizenship and working life competence

min 9 competence points

- Active citizenship
- Working life competence
- Competence development
- Entrepreneurial competence
- Competence to maintain working ability and health
- Sustainable development competence

Source: *Presentation by Finnish National Agency for Education, EDUFI April 2024*

Designing Finnish Vocational Qualifications - Preparing for the Future



Source: *Presentation by Finnish National Agency for Education, EDUFI April 2024*

VET providers play a central role in qualification design, working closely with local and regional stakeholders ensuring close links with ‘working life’ (employers and their representatives). There are three elements to the role of providers:

- **Responsibility:** VET providers must respond to national and regional labour market needs, reflected in qualification design and skills needs analysis.
- **Collaboration:** VET providers involve regional agencies, and National Education and Training Committees to tailor programs to local industry demands.
- **Autonomy:** VET providers have autonomy in determining which qualifications and study programs to offer, with input from business, industry representatives, and students.

Close Cooperation with Working Life in every step of the process



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Source: *Presentation by Finnish National Agency for Education, EDUFI April 2024*

Qualifications and competencies sit with the [Finnish National Framework for Qualifications \(FiNQF\)](#) which is designed to serve several important purposes:

- **Transparency and Comparability:** It aims to make the Finnish qualifications system clearer and more transparent, facilitating the comparison of qualifications and qualification levels both nationally and internationally
- **Recognition of Qualifications:** The framework helps in recognizing qualifications, which promotes national and international mobility for learners and workers.
- **Lifelong Learning:** It supports lifelong learning by describing the learning outcomes and competences required for various qualifications, making it easier for individuals to understand and pursue further education and training.
- **Alignment with European Standards:** aligns closely with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), ensuring that Finnish qualifications are comparable with those from other European countries.
- **Educational Cooperation:** It paves the way for cooperation among educational institutions and other stakeholders, enhancing the quality and relevance of educational services

Examples of [Specific Levels](#) within the FiNQF include:

- **Level 3:** Preparatory studies for general upper secondary school (LUVA), Preparatory education for vocational training (VALMA), and others.

- Level 4: General upper secondary school syllabus, Upper secondary vocational qualifications, Basic Examination in Prison Services, and more.
- Level 5: Specialist vocational qualifications, Sub-Officer Qualification (Fire and Rescue Services), and others.
- Level 6: Bachelor's degrees at universities and universities of applied sciences, Professional specialisation programs, and more.

Work-based learning is strongly fostered through the competency-based nature of the FiNQF. There are three elements to this approach. The first is parallel learning pathways. In the competence-based VET system, both school-based VET and apprenticeships run in parallel. These pathways adhere to the same national qualification requirements. Instead of relying solely on final examinations, competence is demonstrated and assessed through [practical tasks](#) during workplace learning

The second is on-the-job training. All three-year VET programs (equivalent to 120 credits) include a minimum of six months of on-the-job training. During these periods, students engage in genuine working environments, gaining practical experience and applying their skills.

The third element is goal-oriented workplace learning. Students' work experience is explicitly defined as workplace *learning*, distinct from merely practising skills acquired in another setting.

In Finland, [apprenticeship training](#) is a well-established pathway for developing skills relevant to the workforce. Apprenticeships are delivered through initial vocational qualifications (EQF3), further vocational qualifications (EQF4), and specialist vocational qualifications (EQF5). Apprenticeships can incorporate an entire qualification or specific modules and meet the following criteria:

- training primarily occurs at the workplace.
- combines practical job tasks with studies in other learning environments if needed.
- involves a fixed-term employment relationship or public service relationship between a student (at least 15 years old) and an employer.
- students receive a salary, and employers receive training compensation.
- The average weekly working hours during apprenticeship training must be at least 25 hours.

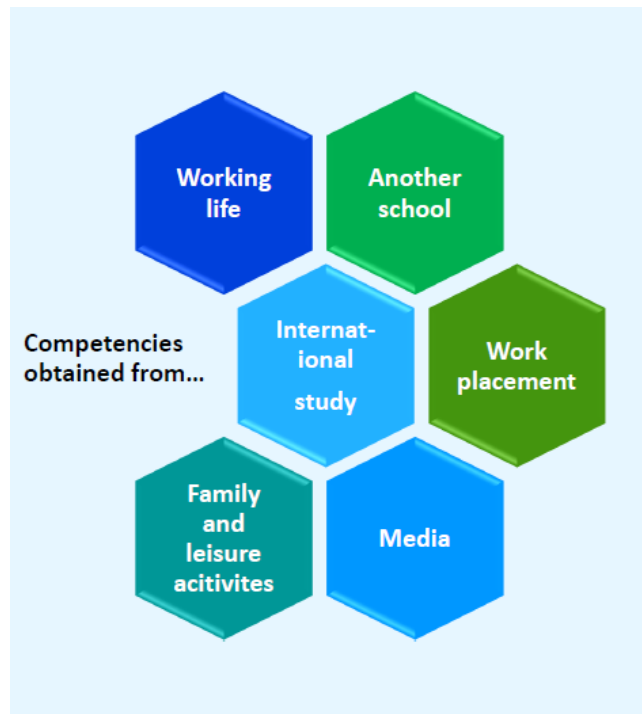
In Finland, apprenticeships have been used to provide further training for adults who already have work experience and may have previous qualifications. A recent [ILO report](#) (March 2023) focuses on the positioning of apprenticeships for adults and older workers in Finland. In doing so, the authors also highlight the relevance of the policies, guidelines, and strategies implemented by Finland to make adult apprenticeships attractive.

3.7 Recognition and Validation of Prior Learning and Experience in Finland

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) has played a significant role in Finnish VET since 2006. [CEDEFOP 2019](#) highlights several key elements of RPL in contributing to the flexibility and responsiveness of the system:

- **Competence-Based Approach:** includes recognising and validating skills and knowledge acquired outside formal education. This allows students to avoid repeating learning they have already mastered.
- **Personal Competence Development Plans:** documents previously acquired skills and outlines the competences needed to acquire.
- **Flexibility and Efficiency:** RPL enables students to progress more quickly through their studies. It also helps in tailoring education to meet individual needs and career goals
- **Support for Lifelong Learning:** through facilitating adults to return to education and gain new qualifications. This is particularly important in a rapidly changing job market where upskilling and reskilling are essential¹.
- **Policy and Funding:** As described in section 2.5 the Finnish VET funding system encourages the validation of prior learning. A portion of government funding is allocated based on the completion of qualifications or parts of qualifications, which includes recognising prior learning.

In the Finnish VET system, validation of non-formal and informal learning is considered a subjective right of the individual, meaning that competences should be validated regardless of when and where they were acquired.



The VET provider decides on the recognition which can be based on documentation presented and/or competence demonstration. Each student's personal competence development plan must include recognition of prior learning, which must be recognized in all VET qualifications, including vocational, further, and specialist qualifications. Recognition is based on learning outcomes not on the period of study (such as guided learning hours) or attendance.

3.8 Lifelong Guidance in Finland

The term 'lifelong guidance' is commonly used in European policy documents. It is broader than the concept of careers advice as it encompasses counselling, skills assessment and mentoring *for all ages*. There is a clear link between lifelong guidance and lifelong learning in terms of enabling individuals to manage their own careers; there is a defined educational role for guidance professionals. [From 2018](#), there is one module on career education in the national qualification requirement for all three-year vocational qualifications. Guidance decisions are recorded in the learner's Personal Competence Development Plan (see 2.6 below). 'Guidance and counselling' are defined as an 'entitlement' for VET students.

The [Finnish VET system](#) is underpinned by comprehensive lifelong guidance and support for careers management skills. The brochure [Criteria for Good Guidance](#) published in 2023, is aimed at both VET students and guidance staff. Taking a 'learner-centric' approach, it outlines what the public and professionals can expect from the system by showing what 'good guidance' looks like:

- holistic: supporting the learner's 'overall situation' in life, by enabling reflection and planning for the future

- meaningful: strengthening the learner’s overall motivation and capabilities
- accessible: providing support through a variety of measures (remote, digital, face-to-face), in peer groups or individually
- multi-disciplinary (education, employment service, student welfare, and stakeholders including parents / guardians) working together with a shared understanding of individual need
- equal and sustainable: addressing cultural diversity, enabling human dignity, supporting wellbeing, promoting gender equality and skills for a sustainable future.

Source: [Criteria for Good Guidance \(2023\)](#)

In a sense, there is nothing here as a set of guidelines that education professionals around the world would not sign up to. The key question is how this aspiration is resourced and delivered. Interestingly, the responsible department for lifelong guidance in Finland is the Ministry for Economic Affairs and Employment. However, the national Lifelong Guidance Forum (formed in 2020) is co-chaired by the Ministry for Education and Culture. The Forum (other ministries, trades unions, business confederations, professional bodies, learner representative groups, careers services, VET providers including universities) has created a strategy for [lifelong guidance for 2020-2023](#).

Regional development and coordination of lifelong guidance is the responsibility of the Centres for Economic Development, Transport and Environment. Although budgets for guidance seemed to be dispersed across agencies, it is hard to pin down the global amount allocated by provider, agency, or region (including those activities supplemented by European Commission funding streams.) The nature of working through educational providers presents some risks, seen through the lens of the competitive market model that prevails across most of the UK. The employment of guidance workers by schools and VET institutions presents the risk that advisers will prioritise institutional over learner interest.

For learners with additional needs, we saw evidence of a multi-agency approach to guidance and progression planning at LUOVI, a specialist VET provider. This was assisted by the TELMA preparatory VET routes having guidance embedded into programme delivery. We met one learner who was referred to the provider by a health agency. Continued psychological support enabled this student to stay on course and manage their condition.

For those adults and young people outside the VET system and wishing to access it, guidance support is provided in ways linked to the situation they are in: ‘early leavers’, NEET 16-24-year-olds; unemployed adults, economically inactive adult’s undecided about returning to the labour market. For example, there are 70 One-Stop Guidance Centres (*Ohjaamo*) across Finland where under 30-year-olds receive free support on education, employment, housing and ‘everything in between’ (according to its website www.ohjaamot.fi). Face-to-face services are supported by national online databases of available courses in VET and general upper-secondary education (*lukio*). Both face-to-face and online services can call on data from skills anticipation exercises (see 2.3 above).

One criticism of Finnish lifelong guidance in the literature concerns the support for adults with ‘low basic skills’ (OECD Finland 2020 report). One solution suggested was the development of guidance services through employment centres in Finland’s 118 municipalities. The OECD notes budget cuts to public employment services have reduced capacity and capability to deliver this service. The OECD also notes that ‘virtual information opportunities are typically not sufficient to help all adults make appropriate education and training choices. They should be accompanied by face-to-face advice and guidance services that offer holistic tailored advice to individual circumstances.’ In other words, the *Ohjaamo* approach should apply across all working age cohorts. The OECD is keen to stress the Finnish VET system is good *once learners are in it* and most prospective students have no access problems. However, given the equality criterion above, the system needs to meet the needs of all potential users.

3.9 The VET Workforce in Finland

‘Competence’ is frequently-used in Finnish educational policy documents not just in relation to learners and workers, but to the education providers themselves. The issue of competence has two aspects: the first relates to the capacity of VET providers to deliver the government’s agenda; the second to how VET teachers, instructors, managers and leaders are upskilled and remain professionally updated.

The 2018 reforms outlined a need to reform the provider base to respond to demographic change (in sparsely populated areas) and deliver more efficiently by merged back-office functions. Both VET providers we visited were part of larger entities that allowed local delivery within a wider organisational context.

It was clear from the field visit and subsequent conversations that the high degree of trust, apparent in the policy narrative and closely related to the notion of competence, is a reality between VET providers and Finnish education agencies. This trust was exemplified by long-standing collaborative arrangements, made possible through robust [collaborative frameworks](#) between providers, and both national and local authorities, which support the alignment of educational policies and practices. Remarkably, government agencies can access provider performance data on a daily basis.

No education inspectorate exists in Finland however various devices contribute to an evidence base related to quality of VET. Within a national [VET quality strategy](#) providers are expected to undertake self-evaluation and improvement. As outlined in section 2.5, the VET funding system rewards education providers based on outcomes, efficiency, and effectiveness, encouraging continuous quality improvement. [FINEEC](#) undertakes external evaluations of how well VET providers meet national quality standards, analyses the outcomes and impacts of VET programs on students and the workforce and identifies and disseminates best practice in VET.

Finnish VET teachers are highly trained and qualified, mostly through UAS. Vocational expertise is recognised through bachelor or master level degrees in their vocational subject, supported by at least three years extensive industrial experience, and the completion of a teaching qualification. At Omnia, this was undertaken through an in-service route and needed to be completed within three years of appointment to the college where 94.5% of vocational staff hold 'pedagogical competence'. Several of the vocational teachers at Luovi were very experienced and qualified specifically in teaching students with SEND at masters level. The importance of trust, highlighted above, was also reinforced through [research](#) into how teacher effectiveness was positioned within a Finnish system based on flexible, individualised pathways and a lifelong learning ethos.

Finnish vocational teachers spend significant amounts of time working with employers. Broad ranging alliances centring on the co-production of learning underpinning the alignment of vocational education and training with industry needs in Finland are also strengthened through European Commission funded Centres of Vocational Excellence (COVEs). The examples of three sector specific COVEs led by Omnia explored during the fieldwork visit revealed strong co-operation between secondary and tertiary level education providers, research institutes and industry.

The [AutoCOVE](#) initiative aimed to respond to the automotive industry's significant technological changes, with a push toward modern technologies that have less environmental impact. Existing VET curricula and training programs were seen as not adequately covering subjects related to the maintenance / repair of vehicles already on the market and urgent updating is needed for the sector's VET workforce.

It was also clear from our discussions with [Skills Finland](#) during the fieldwork visit that skills competitions also play a significant role in developing the skills of vocational teachers. Important elements include:

- professional networking with opportunities for vocational teachers to network with peers, industry experts, and other professionals
- knowledge exchange for teachers to learn about innovative practices, industry trends and improve their own professional skills
- designing competition tasks reflecting 'pressure testing' that reflect real world industry challenges and closer alignment of teaching approaches with industry expectations
- assessing competitor performance including participants' technical skills and transversal skills like teamwork, collaboration and problem solving. There is also potential for teachers to gain insights into a diversity of approaches in play in work-based settings
- gaining international perspectives, where insights are gained from effective global practice and the opportunities to contextualise for local VET settings

Source: [IJRVET \(2017\)](#)

Discussions with colleagues from AMKE revealed that, as well as engaging in advocacy for the sector, the organisation was active in supporting development projects and building vocational communities of practice to support teachers in their professional development. A [recent focus](#) has been enhancing the use of digital tools to support vocational learning.

Alongside these aspects of developing industry related materials, shaping delivery, and liaison with employers to strengthen work-based learning in the curriculum, other features of VET teachers' roles relate to the central importance of individualised learning pathways within the Finnish VET system. The visit reinforced the positioning of Finnish vocational education as competence-based and learner-orientated and vocational teachers play a key role in the vocational and professional growth of students.

[Research](#) in 2019 revealed that VET teachers needed specific skills and competencies in areas such as pedagogy, guidance, and interaction. Good communication, assessment, and creating appropriate learning conditions are also important competencies for vocational teachers. The positioning of VET teachers in crossing vocational boundaries between their previous occupation and their teaching roles, necessitated the mediating of competences between the two domains. The findings indicated that good communication with students, assessment of students' knowledge, skills and abilities, and creating conditions for learning, were the three most important and achieved competencies in VET teachers' work.

[Information for applicants](#) to vocational education teacher education programmes emphasises how pedagogical skills can be developed in specialist vocational contexts.

The visit to a specialist VET provider (Luovi) revealed the significance of a powerful third dimension to dual professionalism in SEND contexts. This third area could be viewed as the role of a change agent in engaging with inclusive practices in inducting students into the world of work. A [2022 study](#) focused on vocational special needs teachers in Finnish VET systems and their role as change agents in promoting inclusion and diversity in work and society. This research found that teachers played a crucial role in supporting students with special needs in helping them integrate into the VET system, the world of work, and society. The study emphasised the importance of teachers' professionalism, collaboration with working life, and individualised support for students.

Discussion with an individual horticulture teacher at Omnia during the visit revealed that VET teachers play a significant role in the recognition of prior learning (RPL), as described in section 3.7. This is likely to also involve colleagues at a central guidance unit within the college and associated with the preparation of a [competence assessment plan](#) as part of the provider's quality assurance system. The plan details the guidelines and procedures adopted by the education provider regarding the implementation of competence assessment and includes how RPL is carried out.

Discussions with AMKE colleagues suggested that vocational teacher recruitment may be sometimes problematic. For example, the ability of colleges to be highly responsive to employers' needs and regional and local skills priorities may be compromised by a lack of

specific vocational expertise within the teaching workforce. AMKE also reported that salary differences between industry specialists and vocational teachers are having an impact on vocational teacher recruitment and retention.

AMKE also confirmed the key role that vocational teachers play in contributing to the quality of VET, but this is grounded in the need to balance theoretical and practical knowledge. Recent [research](#) has highlighted the need to recognise and address these 'tension patterns'. The priority given to the workforce is coupled with high expectations and the fieldwork visit to Omnia confirmed that VET teachers have a nationally defined workload:

At vocational institutions, the teachers commonly have an annual teaching duty of 798 lessons. In some vocational fields the teachers have overall working hours. This means that the hours devoted to teaching and other activities are defined within an annual number of 1 500 working hours.

Source: [Eurydice](#) (November 2023)

4. Finnish VET Design Principles Applied to Wales

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this project was to undertake a case study of VET reform in Finland to inform strategic thinking in Wales. But this work is not happening in isolation from other developments. At the outset, we noted the [Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales](#) led by Sharon Lusher and the subsequent response by Welsh Government. In addition, there is the publication of Medr's strategic priorities and reports commissioned by Welsh Government such as Hefin David's *Transitions to Employment* and research by the Learning and Work Institute into the respective roles of initial and continuous VET in Wales. Qualifications Wales is commissioning research in response to the Lusher Review. ColegauCymru is engaged in other work on the wider outcomes of further education and the recognition of prior learning.

Although many of the reforms undertaken in Finland are not directly transferable to Wales, the characteristics of Finnish VET certainly are. We call these the 'design principles' of the system; or the things to consider when making changes to the VET system in Wales.

The six design principles are:

- a comprehensive and continuous system
- contemporary data and analysis
- clear attractive pathways
- choice for individuals based on lifelong guidance
- competence-based and flexible
- competent and trusted providers

In a sense, it is hard to argue with these six Cs. One might add to them, arguing in the UK that one of the key principles is 'co-funding' between the state, individuals, and employers. Such an approach aims to minimise the 'deadweight' of the state funding, what individuals or employers would pay for themselves. Although the social contract is different in Finland—personal and corporate taxation is higher and seen as 'covering' VET—there is an increased focus on fee income. Co-funding remains a work-in-progress in the UK from Industry Training Boards to Train to Gain and the Apprenticeship Levy.

The following sub-sections (4.2-4.7) briefly explore each of the 'design principles' in the context of VET in Wales. These comments are intended to provoke thought and lead to some conclusions about what can be done in Wales. The six Cs overlap and therefore there will be some repetition of points made.

4.2 How do we Create a Comprehensive and Continuous System?

We have seen in earlier sections that Finnish VET very much operates within a lifelong learning ethos. Unlike some of its Baltic and Nordic neighbours, Finland does not have a lifelong learning strategy as such. In fact, some Finnish documents seem to conflate lifelong learning with aspects of liberal arts education as delivered by Folk High Schools. The conflation of lifelong learning with what is called Adult Community Learning (ACL) in Wales risks side-lining the effective pedagogical approaches in ACL from the VET context. As we have seen in Finland, this can create an issue in reaching low-skilled adults or those wishing to return to the labour market. In such instances, IVET, and its critical role in developing ‘life skills’, should not be focussed entirely on the young. In short, Wales needs to take a ‘stage not age’ approach.

In recent years, Wales has taken steps towards a [lifelong learning approach](#) that brings it more in line with Nordic approaches to education. However, to date Welsh Government has kept lifelong learning and VET across two different policy domains. Like Finland, Wales has two government departments effectively responsible for VET and although this is broadly managed well in both countries, it can mean some stakeholders engage with one part of the government to the exclusion of the other. In Wales, this situation is compounded by the public employment service (PES) role of the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) having a UK-wide role, with its direction given by the Westminster government. In Finland, the links between ‘labour market training’ and VET is outlined in the VET Act (2017). Delegation to regional offices of government provides a place for PES, VET, economic planning, and skills anticipation exercises to come together. As there are significant demographic as well as sectoral differences across Finland, this approach is seen as important. But regional entities have decision-making powers—they have agency—in a way that [Regional Skills Partnerships](#) in Wales currently do not, despite their crucial role in providing labour market information. In Finland, evidence (data and intelligence) drives policy as well as practice at the regional level.

Clearly a comprehensive system is dependent on local, regional, national and supra-national bodies working together. In Finland, this includes a legal commitment to working within European Union policies. It is also a significant player—you could argue it ‘punches above its weight’—in its contributions to international bodies like CEDEFOP, Eurydice, and OECD (including competence-based benchmarking exercises). There is a confidence in Finland in addressing its weaknesses. In doing so, it was able to undertake a root and branch reform of the VET system from 2018 onwards. The reform was less about the ‘machinery of government’ than the way learners, business, and VET providers interacted within the context of challenging times. The needs of individuals and business were put at the heart of the reform.

Finnish VET is also ‘comprehensive’ in the sense being linked with ‘basic education’ (in schools) and early years education and care. In the case of schools, VET has a clear and consistent role in Finland that is patchy in the UK. In Finland, VET is regarded as a valid route although higher performing students still tend to go down the academic pathway. The separation of

universities from the administration of the Finnish National Education Agency (EDUFI) could be seen as a point of weakness—and certainly a divergence from the ‘whole tertiary’ approach in Wales.

‘Comprehensive’ in Finland also includes the sense of being coherent and inclusive. During this project, we saw direct evidence of a multi-agency support for young people with special educational needs, either in specialist providers or in the mainstream. Specialist VET pathways are designed to link with the mainstream. However, the statistics show that inclusivity remains a challenge for Finland, as it does in Wales. High levels of NEET suggest some young people (those with basic skills needs or low-level competences, disabled people, and inward migrants) are missing out. All of which are familiar to UK policy makers, but does Wales have a better plan for these groups?

Another aspect of Finnish VET is that learners can gain (and be recognised for) transversal or life skills on VET pathways. This approach has much resonance to practice, particularly in Welsh colleges, around an enhancement curriculum for VET learners, mainly at the IVET stage. Colleges, in both Finland and Wales, play a role in preparing young people for life as well as the workplace, what some educationalists call ‘socialisation’. In Finland, conscription of young people creates a hiatus or an opportunity to ‘socialise’ and gain broader work experience. This approach is currently not a feature of the social contract in the UK.

However, if IVET is partly about socialisation, it raises the question of the role of work-based learning and apprenticeships in broadening life skills. How does work-based learning induct young people into vocationally-specific communities of practice, by trade and by size of business? These matters remain unresolved in Wales and would surely be part of any future VET strategy.

In terms of ‘continuous’ learning (or CVET in the vocational context), Finland has clearly addressed this as a matter of urgency. The Finnish Government has taken advice from international agencies and examples of best practice elsewhere in developed economies, mainly European. The reason is partly financial or fiscal. Given the rate of change in workplaces—largely due to technical innovation—there is a need to provide upskilling for those already in the labour market (the vast majority of working age Finns). However, undertaking large qualifications are a time-expensive way of achieving this and those qualifications naturally lag behind workplace practice, so can lack relevance. Competence is at the heart of the Finnish VET system.

4.3 How do we Provide Contemporary Data and Analysis?

We saw above (sub-section 3.2) how Finland uses evidence (data and intelligence) to inform policy, mainly through large scale national and international studies. The Finnish VET system is placed within the context of a changing global demography and economy. In a sense, the use of data in particular underpins other parts of the system: it shapes the competences

needed, the opportunities young people and adults see as possible, and the pathways that can be taken to achieve them. Quantitative approaches tend to inform medium- to long-term planning; qualitative intelligence informs more short-term analysis. The 'engine room' for data analysis in Finland is at regional level with a strong sectoral element blended in. There is strong stakeholder engagement, not just in name but in practice.

Many of these aspects resonate with skills anticipation approaches in Wales. The imperative to understand the different types of competence needed in various sectors in the future reflects Welsh policy priorities for flexibility in curriculum design and timely adaptation to changing skills demands.

Four potential areas for comparison with the roles of the Welsh Government and the [Regional Skills Partnerships](#) (RSPs) in developing skills anticipation strategies in Wales emerged. As in Finland, considerable interplay exists between Welsh Government [employment and skills plans](#) and the RSPs. However, Welsh VET providers often undertake their own analysis to be able to respond with greater agility to changing business needs. For example, specific tools or models used by RSPs include Welsh Government data sets where there might be a time lag of as much as 18 months.

A key feature of the Finnish system is stakeholder involvement, including employers, trade unions, labour market intermediaries, and educational institutions. The spatial levels include local and regional level municipalities, and public employment service offices. Chambers of Commerce, ELY Centres, local networks and employers contribute to higher education boards which assess labour market needs, both qualitatively and quantitatively, of graduates. [FinnSight 2022](#), for example, focused on the change in the world of work and future learning needs in Finland, highlighted the need for competence-based learning at all levels of education in order to meet the needs of the labour market and society.

In Wales, RSPs involve stakeholders such as major trade unions, employers, regional councils, and educational institutions in anticipation exercises. But the four RSPs operate with differing levels of capacity and capability; their plans are presented in a variety of formats that can be confusing to those agencies and businesses that operate across regional boundaries. The plans are glossy and professionally presented but they quickly become historical documents as opposed to real-time tools to enable action.

Both Finland and Wales have challenges in engaging smaller and micro-businesses in regional anticipation activities. In Finland, VET providers are reported to invest significant resource in capacity building in SMEs.

Skills anticipation is a crucial tool in any VET strategy. It should happen meaningfully at both the national and sub-national level, which means not merely putting national data into a regional context. It is encouraging that Welsh RSPs undertake their own employer surveys, and this approach could be built on to reduce the need for VET providers to do their own analyses. RSPs are perceived by VET providers as being inconsistent in their approaches and

often with their own agendas that do not always align with colleges'. To the outsider, it feels less of a coherent system than in Finland.

The role of Medr should bring greater coherence but how the roles of RSPs (and other agencies such as Qualifications Wales) align is not clear at this stage. Medr's strategic priorities, as set by Welsh Government in a [high-level policy document](#) (2024), mentions RSPs once:

Develop strong links with business and industry, the Regional Skills Partnerships and Careers Wales to understand key labour market intelligence, using it, together with other data, to influence the skills system and, working with Qualifications Wales [on] vocational qualifications.

Source: [*Statement of Strategic Priorities for Tertiary Education and Research and Innovation, Welsh Government \(2024\)*](#).

The systemic interaction of RSPs with other agencies like Careers Wales and Qualifications Wales is an acknowledgement of the interrelation of their roles across institutional boundaries. However, this feels more laissez-faire than the Finnish approach where the relationships and common endeavour is more tightly defined. Will Medr's priority to 'develop strong links' become more tightly defined as part of a rigorous process of strategic planning? Indeed, is it within Medr's remit and powers to have a strategic oversight over this key aspect of delivering an effective VET system? Or, will this be left in the hands of Welsh Government and its commitment to strengthen RSPs?

4.4 How do we Enable Clear Attractive Pathways?

In Finland, the clarity of VET pathways for learners is partly due to the structure of the competence-based system and the types of qualification routes available. At the VET entry level, both TUVA and TEEMA have generic elements linked to 'life skills' and the personal competence development plan (PCDP). The PCDP adds an 'individualised' element to pathways that is seen as desirable in many systems. The question is how to achieve this in a cost-effective way. Bespoke tailoring is more expensive than 'made to measure'.

We have seen that the situation in Finland is not perfect—its government and VET providers are open about this—particularly around transitions for low-skilled young people and adults. Similar challenges exist in Wales, partly due to some young people's outcomes at school, the advice they receive, and the opportunities for unemployed or economically inactive adults to retrain or re-enter the labour market. Finland has recognised, in taking an internationally comparative approach through OECD and others, the need to develop a more flexible 'continuous learning' approach for adults already in the labour market (or at that life stage). The continuous learning approach is characterised by a focus on the achievement of competences that allow swift labour market progression. (Does a skilled or semi-skilled

person need a full qualification when moving to another industry?) Wales has taken a few tentative steps in that direction with the Personal Learning Account (PLA) initiative, with for example a focus on a [Green PLA](#) with units for upskilling workers into jobs within the Net Zero economy. However, the majority of VET for adults in Wales remains in the domain of ‘full fat qualifications’, when perhaps a ‘skills lite’ approach is needed.

In Finland, ‘initial’ VET that is focussed on the ‘flow’ into the labour market, is not exclusively focussed on the 16-24 years cohort (used in the age-related definition of IVET). In fact, about half of IVET trainees are over 25 years. IVET is more about the stage individuals are at in their careers rather than their age. This ‘stage not age’ approach is one often rehearsed in policy documents but rarely seen in practice, partly because it requires an individualised approach. Undoubtedly in both Finland and Wales, IVET plays a clear role in the socialisation of young people and has wider societal as well as economic benefits. But that does not mean all IVET needs to be designed around the needs of young people.

In terms of ‘clear attractive pathways’, we have to ask ourselves: ‘clear to whom’ and ‘attractive to whom’. In terms of clarity, this has to happen at the individual level; pathways must be clear to prospective students and apprentices. However, these pathways must also be clear to those that advise them. The link between competences and job roles also needs to be clear. For our aspiring chef (in 2.6 above) wishing to work on board a freighter sailing out of Helsinki or Hanko, there is a competence called ‘ship catering service’ (20 competence points). If that chef is already qualified in other aspects of catering, perhaps they only need that ‘top up’. In other words, the clarity of the pathway applies to both IVET and CVET. At heart, like so many aspects of life, it remains an individual choice and one that should not be constrained by bureaucracy or institutional self-interest.

The issue of ‘attractive’ pathways is more complex. Often individual choices are constrained by their environments and knowledge of working life, so guidance plays a key role in this (see 4.5 below). As we know, for some young people it is a question of which pathways are considered attractive to their parents or other influencers. Influence that is hopefully undertaken in good faith and with up-to-date knowledge. School staff might, for example, have a limited knowledge of contemporary workplaces outside of education. Hefin David’s report on transitions points to a ‘fragmented’ system and part of this fragmentation is around a coherent narrative on VET in Wales. Dr David’s analysis links ‘clarity’ of choice with learners’ ability to ‘map learning pathways.’ There is a clear role for Careers Wales in this activity—at least with ‘gateway’ learners preparing for working life or further education—working alongside employers, schools and colleges. However, the nature of the fragmented system and the competitive environment many providers operate within, means that schools and VET providers may also undertake this work in the service of their own institutional interest. Therefore, pathways that provide real choice—or clarity on the options available—are highly dependent on impartial information, advice and guidance (IAG).

Estyn's review of the [Junior Apprenticeships programme in Wales](#) showed the potential to engage students in VET pathways, albeit in a relatively small programme that makes it the exception rather than the norm. A clear 14-19 pathway in Wales would help to articulate the options available for all students.

The Welsh Government has accepted a recommendation (15) from the Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales, for *all learners* including those with disabilities and learning difficulties. But to see problems with 'transition' into VET solely as an 'IAG issue' is to increase the dependence on parts of the current system rather than reform the system itself. In Finland, the system is designed around individualised learner pathways—competence-based with a personal competence development plan—whereas in Wales, learners have to shape themselves to the qualification available.

4.5 How do we Provide Choice for Individuals Based on Lifelong Guidance?

The existence of a map alone does not automatically mean map-reading skills. If the learner is at the heart of the system, then learners have to be empowered to make their own decisions. We have seen (in 2.5 above) that 'lifelong guidance' in Finland encompasses counselling, skills assessment and mentoring *for all ages*. There is a focus on enabling individuals to manage their own careers; it is part of the personal development competence plan for Finnish VET learners and is defined as an 'entitlement'. Finland's [Criteria for Good Guidance](#) defines for all agencies what 'good guidance' looks like at a local, regional and national level. Investment in the seventy one-stop guidance centres aims to reach those under 30 who are most marginalised. OECD's report on the Finnish system (2020) makes suggestions for improvement in terms of guidance linked to local public employment service centres. Although lifelong guidance in Finland is still a 'work-in-progress', it is an integrated part of the Finnish VET system.

Finland has more qualified careers professionals, all of whom are employed by educational providers and other agencies, according to [CEDEFOP](#) (2022). In Finland, impartiality seems to be assured by the professional status of careers staff. However, we have seen that higher-performing school students (particularly girls) in Finland tend to take non-VET pathways, at least initially. The Welsh Government invests over £20m per annum in Careers Wales and the organisation is currently working on an analysis of its return on investment. That impact on employment and/or certain groups such as NEETs, needs to be set alongside the work of other agencies such as local authorities and job centres. Careers advice and guidance is a key element of employment support services in Wales, and there is usually an upskilling or re-skilling aspect to this. But this support tends to be characterised by a '[one-size-fits-all](#)' approach. If Wales decides to join other European nations in a lifelong guidance approach, should it set out its own criteria for good guidance that all agencies sign up to?

4.6 How can we make the System Competence-based and Flexible?

Some might argue that we already have a competence-based system in Wales through linking national occupational standards with qualifications. Vocational qualifications (VQs) provide a competence-based approach to assessment and accreditation of skills gained and applied in context. However, as the Review of Vocational Qualifications and Welsh Government's response acknowledges, there is still work to be done to make the system fit for purpose. Welsh Government is 'working to progress the recommendations' aimed at Qualifications Wales in the short term:

- renewing its approach to sector reviews
- expanding the remit of sector qualification groups
- exploring how best to recognise generic work-based learning
- giving increased consideration to the manageability of assessments (from both learner and provider perspectives)
- increasing the number of bilingual qualifications
- developing its qualifications database in term of VQs available through the medium of Welsh
- producing, with stakeholders, VQ 'route maps' to enable learners to identify progression opportunities
- promoting, with providers, single or multiple units of VQs to employers and encouraging awarding bodies to make unit certification to meet demand
- establishing professional development and resource implications, and developing an implementation plan

Source: [*Vocational Qualifications Review: Welsh Government Response \(2024\)*](#)

The Review of Vocational Qualifications (2023) also addresses the problem of a lack of demand for VQs in Wales (for the over 19 years cohort).

There is a view that vocational qualifications take too long to achieve when employers need the ability to upskill or re-skill quickly. We need to be able to provide qualifications in smaller 'bite size' chunks, so that we can respond more quickly to employer needs. This may involve delivering a single unit, or a combination of units from vocational qualifications, to provide the right skills. Awarding bodies can offer 'micro-credentials', digital badges, and unit certification. Learning providers can and do provide these units of delivery, but more awareness of such is required.

Source: [*A Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales \(2023\)*](#)

The move towards 'bite-sized', flexible competence-based units of learning, was identified as a job for Medr by the Review, possibly linked to a 'rapid response fund' (recommendation 25). However, as with all the recommendations, the focus is on making the current 'open market'

system work. The question is whether a move towards a Finnish style competence-based system requires a centralised awarding body structure.

One positive aspect of the Review and Welsh Government's response was in the area of recognition of prior learning (RPL). The recommendation (26), however, was merely to review whether the current arrangements for RPL in Wales 'remain appropriate.' Welsh Government recognises that 'there is currently no formal RPL policy' in Wales and will work with Medr in taking this forward. This response recognises that the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) provides a solid basis for taking this forward.

It was clear from the CollegesWales RPL research that considerable activity is taking place in Wales that echoes many of the strengths of Finnish VET. For example, the focus on Net Zero in Wales is seen as a significant context for developing the use of RPL in bridging the gap between existing expertise and the transition to sustainable industries. For example, in terms of [Net Zero Wales](#), the Welsh Government's aim to achieve net zero emissions by 2050 means transitioning from declining industries to sustainable practices is challenging. RPL enables mature workers with industry experience to transfer their skills to new sectors aligned with sustainability goals. Many stakeholders, including those involved in Net Zero planning, find RPL appealing. Ongoing discussions highlight the importance of recognizing existing skills for a greener, stronger Wales.

Much is also to be learnt closer to home, in Scotland and Ireland. However, there are resource challenges in implementing RPL which often requires one-to-one conversations with participants. While there are clear benefits for individual participants, consider the broader impact on the skill system. RPL's impact extends beyond individuals—it contributes to a more skilled workforce and a resilient economy. RPL initiatives in Wales lack the public visibility they enjoy in Finland or in Scotland's 'whole nation approach'. For example, Scottish Employers are encouraged to state required SQF levels in job advertisements.

One possible advantage Wales has, in establishing a tertiary system, is creating a level playing field where providers outside of higher education can also accredit qualifications based on credit achieved through courses and RPL.

4.7 How do we Empower Competent, Qualified and Trusted Providers?

Finland and Wales have many commonalities, but institutional structures are different, as we have seen, from the policy level to regional and local implementation. One difference between Nordic countries and other parts of Europe, such as the UK, is the social contract between the state and its actors. Large VET providers—what would be called 'colleges' in the Welsh context—are a trusted part of the system, contributing to policy development from early developmental stages. Crucially, for businesses and VET providers, the vocational route

had parity of esteem with academic pathways. The 2018-2024 ongoing VET reform in Finland has taken place within this context, putting students' best interests at the heart of the changes made, by involving those closest to the learner, the VET provider and/or the employer. VET providers and employers both meaningfully contribute to the design and assessment of competences, as well as skills anticipation exercises. Higher education is positioned differently in the Finnish VET system—same ministry of state, separate administration—with 'polytechnic' model (UAS) focussing on higher level training for and in the workplace, alongside 'research-driven' universities.

Part of the reason for the trust in Finnish VET providers is the qualification level and professional status of its staff, often accredited through the UAS system. This impacts on the relative status of VET staff. No direct research has been undertaken to explore comparisons of vocational teachers between Finland and Wales. However, a [2022 study](#) examined the situation including recruitment and retention issues, between Finland and Ohio, USA. This research highlighted that the complexities of country specific contexts made comparisons difficult, nevertheless the emphasis on vocational teachers understanding the characteristics of contemporary industrial contexts through the development of dual professionalism applied in both settings.

Vocational teachers in Finland see themselves as 'dual professionals', specialists in pedagogy and in contemporary vocational practice. They are well qualified and experienced in their vocational areas and will hold a teaching qualification. The profession is held in high regard with relatively high salaries. Broad ranging alliances on the co-production of learning in Finland are strengthened through the Centres of Vocational Excellence (see 3.9 above).

[Dual Professionalism](#) has long been part of the policy debate in England and the extensive investment by the Education and Training Foundation into approaches and toolkits relating to '[Teach Too](#)' and '[Industry Insights](#)'. Dual professionalism has also been a '[central strand](#)' of VET workforce standards in Wales since 2017. The opportunity for Welsh applicants to [Technical Teaching Fellowships](#) was highlighted in the Senedd 2023.

However, the prestige and status of vocational teachers in Wales is likely to be lower than in Finland. Entry requirements for teacher training are also lower than the Finnish requirement for a graduate/postgraduate qualification coupled with extensive workplace experience. [Estyn's 2021 report](#) signposts Education Workforce Council (EWC) [data](#) as indicating that 86% of those teachers in Further Education Institutes, who had declared their qualifications, held a teaching qualification. Estyn highlighted that the minimum entry level for a vocational teacher training qualification (Professional Certificate in Education) is a level 3 or equivalent experience in their vocational subject. Graduate entry to the profession is through a Post Graduate Certificate or Professional Graduate Certificate.

The crucial role that vocational teachers in Wales hold in the education system was highlighted in the [Lusher Review](#), which acknowledged that 'stakeholders agreed that any future VET

strategy for Wales requires a clear plan for the workforce that delivers and supports it; the priority is a plan for the recruitment and upskilling of teachers, trainers, and assessors’.

Welsh Government has recently updated the [professional standards for further education teachers](#) together with notes on their implementation. These standards echo many aspects of teacher training courses in Finland where similar specific professional standards do not exist. However, the standards in Wales are not statutory, despite being positioned alongside registration with the Education Workforce Council and access to the Professional Learning Passport. The need to develop a dual focus on vocational teaching and subject knowledge feature within the standards. Examples of professional learning exemplifying the standards include collaboration with employers. The newly implemented [professional development hub](#) for teachers includes specific resources for all further education teachers.

Many of the benefits for the professional development of vocational teachers that arose from supporting and engaging in skills competition in Finland are [paralleled in Wales](#) through alignment with the broader WorldSkills movement.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Welsh Government should Develop a Vocational Education and Training Strategy

A key learning point from this project has been the cohesiveness of the Finnish VET system coupled with an agility for 'moving freely'. This has been achieved by a clear strategic approach to VET that is long-term, is based on a clear analysis of its operating environment, and links with other parts of government. The Finnish skills system also pays attention to its own vocational needs in developing, valuing and rewarding its VET workforce.

It is clear that a high level of trust exists between all partners in the Finnish VET system, reflected in funding methodologies and considerable autonomy for VET providers.

All these elements are part of a strategic approach where government takes responsibility for the many actors involved in VET delivery. In this context, providers are part of a mature system with strong governance arrangements and financial management systems. Although some recent reports have called for a VET strategy for Wales, the Welsh Government has indicated its preferred approach will be a 'policy statement'. It is our view that this would be insufficient in coordinating the many 'moving parts' of the VET system in Wales, where no single agency holds overarching control.

Elements of the strategy should include:

- Analysis of future drivers for change affecting VET in Wales
- High level success criteria, measures of success, and data processes
- A description of delegated responsibilities to Medr, Qualifications Wales, Careers Wales, Regional Skills Partnerships, Estyn etc.
- Detailed national skills anticipation processes and responsibilities
- Articulation of the VET system with pre-16 education, including junior apprenticeships, initial vocational qualifications and traineeships. Important considerations include how VET is promoted and transition enabled during the 14-19 stage.
- Analysis of VET's contributions to the desired outcomes of other Welsh Government strategies including health, wellbeing, active citizenship and innovation.
- Articulation with UK government responsibilities that affect Wales.
- A research and development plan to ensure the strategy's elements are evaluated.
- The process for licensing providers of VET and how they are involved in strategic review.
- A workforce plan that outlines how VET teachers are recruited, supported and remunerated.
- A medium-term high-level financing, funding and audit strategy.

- A recognition, accreditation, and qualifications policy.
- How the VET system will be regulated, quality assured and reported on.
- How learners and stakeholders will be involved in evaluation and policy development.
- A recognition to reshape the regulatory principles and environment that reflects the need to trust VET providers and to give them the flexibility to respond appropriately at a local and regional level to learner and employer demand.

However, while the VET strategy is being developed there are some underpinning priorities that could be undertaken to help the current VET system respond to a fast-changing environment. These are outlined in shorter term actions described in recommendations 5.2 – 5.7.

5.2 Welsh Government should Develop National Skills Anticipation Planning

Finnish VET is planned and delivered based on reliable, contemporary data, collected in a systematic and coordinated way. That should be the aspiration in Wales. The current system does not work with significant regional variation in approaches in Wales that results in data that providers often regard as unreliable. This unreliability leads to duplication at the institutional level and is therefore a waste of scarce resources.

The size of Wales merits a national approach with regional and sectoral input. Welsh Government should take the strategic lead on this ‘critical infrastructure’ of VET and skills policy. Providers need to trust the resulting data—as they do in Finland—that should be available in a timely manner.

In order to achieve this, resources should be channelled into a coordinated approach that involves VET providers working alongside sub-national agencies, such as RSPs. Coherent interplay between national and regional inputs is an important consideration for skills anticipation data to be used effectively in planning VET provision. Policy implementation should have direct ministerial oversight.

5.3 Medr should Develop Funding Approaches that Enable Funding Flexibility and Consistency for VET Providers

VET is a key element of the tertiary system in Wales. However, it does not currently enjoy parity of esteem with academic routes or funding flexibility. The current VET funding system is over-complex and tied too closely to the achievement of full qualifications. This should be kept under review as research commissioned as a result of the Lusher Review (for example into work-based learning) reveals possible ways forward. To further support an agile and

responsive VET system, CollegesWales should work with members to reflect how the Finnish model of funding wider outcomes could be applied in Wales. Such analyses need to take account of starting points for both pre-16 learners and adults experiencing disadvantage, where both costs and benefits are likely to be higher.

5.4 Qualifications Wales should engage with the VET Sector to Explore the Transferability of a Competence Points System for Wales.

The concept of ‘competence’ is at the heart of the Finnish system, the cornerstone of trust in VET providers by employers, individuals, and the state. Competence is assessed in the workplace and can also be attributed from prior learning in workplace contexts.

Further work should be undertaken alongside Qualifications Wales’s ongoing activity on microcredentials and recognition of prior learning. A sector-led trial funded by Welsh Government should be undertaken where colleges are given credit awarding powers that allow learners to undertake recognised bite-sized learning opportunities that enable workplace progression.

Within the emerging tertiary system, there is potential to pilot the wider application of ‘shell qualifications’, widely used in higher education settings in Wales. However, such an approach would require greater trust in the further education system and further staff development at the institutional level. A small-scale pilot would enable this approach to be trialled in college settings.

5.5 Careers Wales should work with VET providers to cost the Development of a System of Individualised Vocational Planning and Support

The individualised approach adopted in Finland has long been a policy aspiration in Wales, particularly in enabling effective 14-19 pathways. It has also been an aspiration for adults returning to the labour market or undertaking career change post-Covid. Despite some good initiatives—such as Personal Learning Accounts, React+, Working Wales - the overall approach lacks resource and traction. Both an ‘age’ and ‘stage’ approach is required.

Further work on individualised planning should be piloted with those learners who find making the transition from school to college or the workplace most challenging. If Welsh Government decides to join other European nations in a ‘lifelong guidance’ approach, Careers Wales should build on current criteria for good guidance to which all agencies sign up.

For adults experiencing labour market change—redundancy, economic inactivity, career change—personalised support should be available as an entitlement across agencies such as the [career reviews](#) within the Working Wales initiative, delivered by Careers Wales and funded by the Welsh Government.

5.6 Medr should continue to Prioritise Professional Learning for the FE Sector.

The VET workforce - leaders, managers, assessors, trainers, instructors, teacher - are the people who deliver vocational excellence in workplaces and educational settings. In Finland, there are clear expectations of this workforce in terms of standards and qualifications as well as continuing professional learning.

Following a [2019 scoping study](#) in Wales, attention has recently been given to refreshing the advisory [professional standards](#) for those teaching in the post-16 system. Estyn's (2021) [review](#) of Initial Teacher Education also provides insights into professional learning priorities for teachers in the VET sector. Key priorities should be to address changes in technology and innovation, take account of policy changes for vocational qualifications and a continuing focus on developing dual professionalism including more consistent and systematic approaches for using World Skills in professional learning.



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