

The competence-based approach steers vocational education and training in the right direction

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Progress has been made in the implementation of the competence-based approach, but further development is still required

This review highlights the main results of the *Competence-based, customer-oriented and efficient vocational education and training* evaluation (2016–2017). In the evaluation, the competence-based approach related to the qualification reform in vocational upper secondary education and the factors enhancing and hindering the realisation of the approach were examined with a future-oriented perspective. The evaluation also looked at the effects and risks in the reform of vocational education and training (VET) and produced information on the critical success factors and development needs related to the reform.

- The competence-based approach has provided a good foundation for a structural change in VET. It has simplified the qualification system, broadened qualifications and increased customer-orientation by making the studies more flexible and more individualised, by intensifying the cooperation between working life and education providers and by bringing VET closer to working life. However, as qualifications are becoming more broad-based, it is important to ensure that they correspond to the knowledge and competence base required in occupations.
- With the competence-based approach, there will be less regulation in the qualification system, the steering system will be lighter and education providers will have more autonomy and responsibility.
- The competence-based approach has significantly changed the work and job descriptions of teaching staff, which has greatly challenged the development of their competence and capacities.
- The provision of a sufficient number of workplaces and workplace instructors, the competence of workplace instructors and securing sufficient support and guidance for

students and workplace instructors will be critical for the successful implementation of the competence-based approach.

- The role of quality management and quality assurance will be more and more important as competence is increasingly acquired at workplaces and other learning environments. With the disbandment of qualification committees and local boards for vocational skills demonstrations, the new working life committees will play an important part in quality assurance in education.
- From the point of view of the competence-based, customer-oriented approach and operational efficiency, there is a lot of unused potential in the cooperation between education providers.
- Cost structures have changed because of the competence-based approach and will continue to do so when the reform progresses. The focus will move to providing advice and guidance to students, learning at workplaces, cooperation between education providers, development of the competence of the staff and development of pedagogical practices and learning environments. In the future, more appropriations will be needed and they will have to be more clearly allocated to developing these activities.
- With reforms made in funding, efficiency and effectiveness will become more important, which will support the provision of working life-oriented and competence-based education and training. However, the changes in funding and activities also involve risks as regards the quality of education, the competence produced by the education, the operating preconditions of education providers and the equality between different regions.

The evaluation produced information to support the VET reform

VET has been competence-based and working life-oriented for almost twenty years. However, with the projects implemented to develop the qualification system in the 2010s and the qualification reform carried out at their completion (entry into force on 1 August 2015), the competence-based approach was made the priority area of the entire qualification reform. **The key aim in the competence-based approach is to increase the individuality and flexibility of studies and to bring VET closer to working life.**

The aim of the evaluation was to look at the **competence-based and customer-oriented approach and the operational efficiency** of VET (the state of the competence-based approach) and to examine the **relevance, effects, risks and change needs in the related policy measures** (evaluation of the impacts of policy measures).

The evaluation was targeted at the core activities of VET providers, at customer processes closely related to them and at resources supporting the customer processes. The targets of the evaluation were the following:

- Managing the competence-based approach
- Education offered and availability and accessibility of education
- Resources in the competence-based approach
- Operating methods and structures
- Monitoring, evaluation and results, and realisation of the competence-based approach as a whole
- Policy measures
- Synthesis

The evaluation supported the *Vocational education and training reform (2015–2019)*, which aims at reforming VET by making it a competence-based and customer-oriented system, increasing learning at workplaces, increasing the number of individual study paths and reforming education and training to better respond to the changing competence needs of working life, individuals and society. By improving effectiveness, the education system is also adapted to the scarcer resources of the public economy.

The evaluation was targeted at all VET providers and covered all forms of VET leading to a qualification. Information was gathered from the management of education providers, teaching staff, students, working life representatives, interest groups and representatives of the educational and employment administration. A total of 145 VET providers participated in the evaluation, which corresponds to about 90 per cent of all VET providers. Of them, 106 provided VET leading to a qualification¹ in its different forms² and 39 provided similar education and training only as adult education³.

The evaluation was implemented according to the principles of **enhancement-led evaluation** by emphasising active participation of the different parties involved in VET – especially customers – in the production of evaluation data and the interpretation of the results as shown in the evaluation framework in Figure 1. The main evaluation and data collection methods were thus self-evaluation, workshops, an evaluation panel, seminars and interviews.

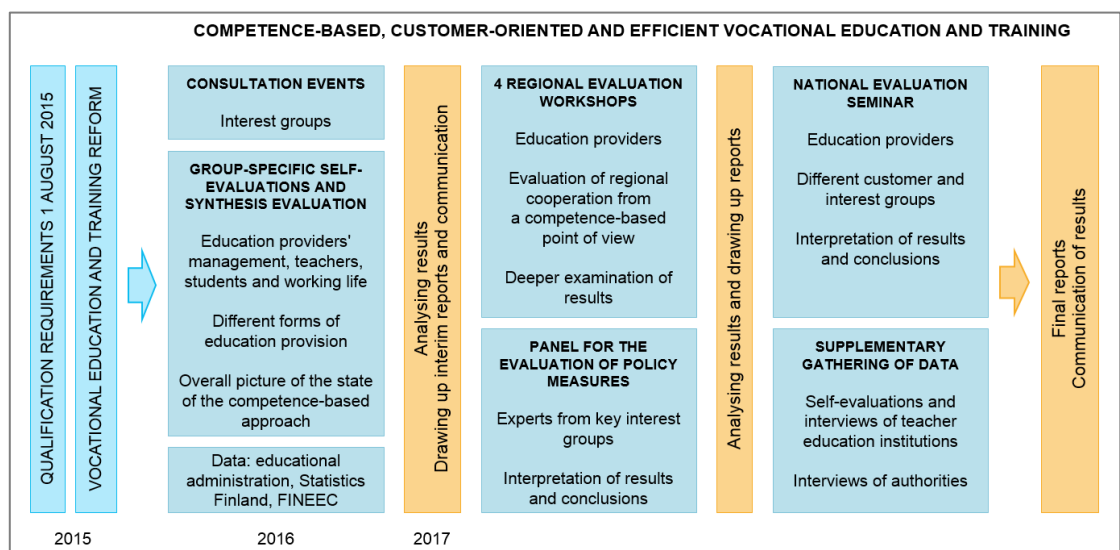


Figure 1. Evaluation framework

Results and conclusions

The state of the competence-based approach

The results of the evaluation show that the state of the competence-based approach is moderate (about 3.5 on a scale of 1 to 5⁴). The state of the competence-based approach is

¹ Vocational upper secondary qualification, further vocational qualification and specialist vocational qualification

² Institutional vocational upper secondary education, competence-based qualifications and education preparing for them, apprenticeship training

³ Competence-based qualifications and education preparing for them, apprenticeship training

⁴ Assessment scale: 1 = is realised extremely poorly, 2 = is realised poorly, 3 = is realised moderately, 4 = is realised well, 5 = is realised extremely well.

best in operating practices and structures and the weakest in monitoring, evaluation and results (Figure 2). In operating methods and structures, VET actors considered student assessment, on-the-job learning and individualisation, in particular, to be the main strengths.

The differences in the state of the competence-based approach between the VET provider groups are fairly small as a whole, although their pace of implementing the approach has been different. Monitoring, evaluation and the results of the competence-based approach are an area in which both groups of VET providers have a lot of development work to do.

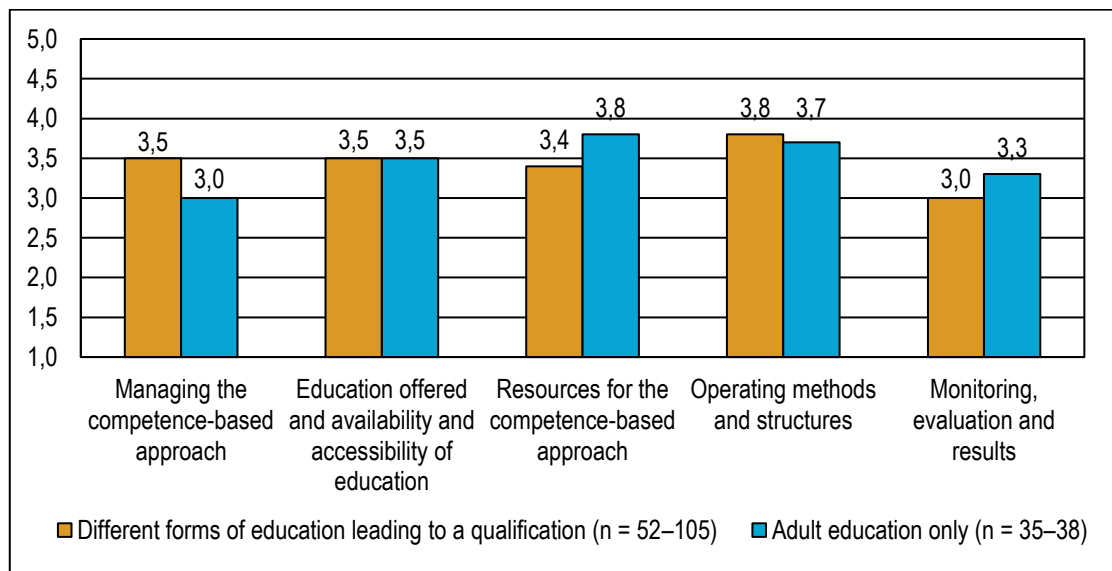


Figure 2. State of the competence-based approach in different areas of evaluation by VET provider group

The reform is seen as an opportunity, but risks are also involved

Education providers, students and working life mainly have a positive attitude to the opportunities brought about by the VET reform and the competence-based approach. The reform brings VET closer to working life, intensifies cooperation between working life and education providers and increases students' opportunities for more individualised studies. At the same time, it puts pressure on working life and education providers to offer more places for on-the-job learning, to make activities more flexible and to renew and develop the work and competence of teaching staff.

The implementation of the competence-based approach has been impeded by the simultaneous savings measures carried out in VET, the tight timetable of the reform and the fact that the key actors in VET, such as working life and students, feel that they have not been informed sufficiently about the reform and its impacts on their activities. From the viewpoint of the implementation, especially the availability of on-the-job learning places and workplace instructors and the support and guidance given to them for their education task will be among the main challenges for the success of the reform. As regards resources, the methods for securing the guidance students require for their individualised studies and ensuring the competence of teachers and workplace instructors are also critical.

Wide variation in the operating methods within education providers, between education providers and in their cooperation with working life creates inequality between students and

burdens working life. With the qualification reform, a process to harmonise operating methods has begun at the level of VET providers, but sharing the good practices and experiences already gained from the competence-based approach is not yet common within or between VET providers. From the competence-based perspective, there is also a lot of unused potential in the cooperation between education providers. By intensifying the cooperation, harmonising the education offered and the operating methods (e.g. study paths, cooperation with working life and cooperation in on-the-job learning), and combining and sharing material and immaterial resources, it would be possible to increase customer-orientation and operational efficiency.

To enhance customer-orientation, education providers should have a shared intention and demonstrate a new kind of leadership, which also requires development of competence. Here, the providers of vocational teacher education have an important role, just like they do in the development of competence of workplace instructors and teachers.

The importance of quality management and quality assurance will be emphasised

With the competence-based approach, the role of quality management and quality assurance will continue to be emphasised as competence will increasingly be acquired at workplaces and in other learning environments. This applies particularly to ensuring the quality of workplaces, on-the-job learning, guidance and assessment of competence.

The results of the evaluation show that there is not, as yet, much evidence of the impacts of the competence-based approach at the level of education providers and that a lot of development is still required in monitoring and evaluation. As regards the implementation of the competence-based approach, it is important that monitoring and evaluation function well and the data obtained from them is utilised in improving the implementation. In addition to evaluation at the level of education providers, external evaluation of activities and quality management are also required to support VET providers and other actors in developing the competence-based approach.



- Increase in student and working life-orientation
- Closer cooperation within the education provider and with other education providers
- Increase in the working life-based approach and individualisation in the planning and implementation of education and training
- More diverse student assessment



- More information on the competence-based approach
- Ensuring sufficient number of on-the-job learning places, workplace instructors and sufficient guidance for students
- Improving the competence of teaching staff and workplace instructors
- Harmonising operating practices and close cooperation between education providers to improve customer-orientation
- More collaboration with working life
- Developing quality management, quality assurance, monitoring and evaluation

Evaluation of the impacts of policy measures (ex ante)

The evaluation examined the relevance, effects, risks and needs for change in the policy measures for developing the competence-based approach, customer-orientation and operational efficiency of VET. The evaluation was partly targeted at the qualification reform of 2015, but its focus was on the forthcoming VET reform. The evaluation examined the effects and risks in the reform from different points of view and produced information on critical success factors and development needs.

The direction of development is correct

According to the evaluation, the direction of the reform concerning the competence-based, customer-oriented approach and operational efficiency is correct – the goals and measures are justified. The earlier qualification reform has laid a good foundation for the forthcoming reform.

The reform has been prepared in extensive long-term cooperation with different actors and parties. The most critical comments made on the reform are related to funding and its predictability and to the ability of the funding system to secure, from the viewpoint of different customer groups, high quality of the competence-based approach. There are also challenges regarding the ability of the system to ensure high quality of education and to prevent phenomena that are harmful for the competence-based approach, such as narrowing competences, lower qualification requirements and maximisation of the number of completed qualifications by lowering the standards.

From the viewpoint of working life, it is essential to successfully anticipate regional educational needs in the short and long term. Equal access to educational opportunities should also be secured.

Different needs must be responded to

In their activities, the education providers must also in the future balance the tasks of educating top experts and preventing marginalisation. According to the evaluation, there is a risk that less attention will be paid to the needs of students requiring special support and to the guidance provided to them. Education provided for different kinds of students should not consume resources from other groups of students. In future, information will be needed on how qualifications, study units and the practices in them support students with difficulties in learning and how they help students to complete, for example, partial qualifications. In addition, resources should be allocated to comprehensive schools, social and family work and to other support that ensures students have the required capacities for vocational studies.

Development of vocational pedagogy

The development of competence-based education and training is about developing and renewing pedagogical thinking and methods. What is essential for students is that norms, resources and information are steered in a way that ensures they can achieve the objectives set for VET and for the competence it produces. The steering – one of the targets of the reform – should also secure to students the opportunity to individualise their studies, the competence required in working life and the opportunity to develop capabilities for further studies.

Practices related to the competence-based approach, such as individualisation of studies, identification and recognition of prior learning, and guidance and assessment of learning should be further developed and this development should be ensured in all fields of education and training and in all qualifications.

The reform is aimed at increasing learning at workplaces. From the point of view of ensuring the competence of students, attention should be paid on making sure that on-the-job learning places enable the development of sufficiently broad-based competence so that students gain the capacity to work for different employers during their working careers. Providing competences that are too narrow limits students' future career prospects.

In connection with the reform, the possibilities to provide different incentives to employers to encourage them to take on students and organise high-quality workplace instruction should be examined.

With the VET reform, the autonomy and responsibility of education providers will increase. At the same time, the methods of providing and implementing education will be renewed and the role of teachers will change. As a consequence, the activities, personnel and relationships with working life should also be managed in a new way. There will be an emphasis on managing change.

The role of teachers has changed alongside the competence-based approach and the reform will result in further changes. These changes require long-term goals and opportunities for developing teachers' work, professional competence and pedagogical practices. Teachers' terms of employment should be developed in terms of the competence-based approach and from the perspective of the goals of the comprehensive reform of VET and the development of professionalism of teachers.

Results, effectiveness and evaluation of education

Systematic evaluation is required to support the implementation of the reform and to analyse its effectiveness. Impact analyses should be utilised for information on the progress made in the reform, the goals achieved and the ability to respond to the needs arising from changes in the operating environments. At the same time, it would be possible to assess how anticipation of impacts corresponds to the actual impacts. Evaluation should be directed at the different parties: students, working life, education providers and teaching and guidance staff.

The effects of the changing funding system should also be monitored and evaluated. At the same time, it should be estimated what kinds of effects reforms made in other administrative sectors have on VET. When evaluating those reforms, it is essential to identify the critical points on which decisions regarding development and possible changes can be based. A long-term vision on the future should be drawn up for VET to steer the strategic development of the education in the long term and to enhance the continuity of educational policies.

Proposed measures

- It should be ensured that **all actors involved in VET receive enough information on the competence-based approach**, what it means and what it requires from them.
 - The **practices related to the competence-based approach should be further developed and their uniformity should be ensured** in all fields of education and training and in all qualifications. Cooperation between education providers should be intensified to improve customer-orientation.
 - Increased learning at workplaces requires that **pedagogical thinking and operating practices, learning environments, the tasks of workplaces and educational institutions and cooperation should be developed**.
 - Attention should be paid to **ensuring the quality of education and training** as learning is increasingly acquired at workplaces. The role of working life committees in quality assurance should be clarified.
 - Systematic **development of the competence** of teaching and guidance staff, workplace instructors and VET managers is necessary to ensure the implementation of the reform. Adequate resources for staff training should be ensured.
 - **The needs of working life and students should be anticipated and the education offered should be adapted** to these needs.
 - The capability of education providers to **safeguard the education and guidance services** provided for different students should be ensured when **steering the productivity** of education and training. The effects of the changing funding system should be monitored and assessed critically. The effects of the separate funding related to education and training should be evaluated.
 - **The terms of employment of teachers** should be redefined so that teachers can support and enable the implementation of the education in the manner required by the reform.
 - **Cooperation in labour policy education** should be developed from the viewpoint of responsibilities and processes.
 - **The indicators used for the monitoring of VET should be developed** so that they meet the requirements of the reform. An evaluation programme should also be drawn up to support the implementation of the reform. In addition, an external auditing system is needed to support and ensure quality management.
 - At national level, a long-term **vision for the future of VET** should be created in cooperation with different actors.
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Background

The evaluation of competence-based, customer-oriented and efficient vocational education and training is related to the Government's research, analysis and assessment activities supporting decision-making and to key project 2⁵, Knowledge and Education, of the Strategic Government Programme⁶, the objective of which is to reform upper secondary VET, its funding and structures in a way that safeguards eligibility for further studies. The aim of the evaluation was for its part to ensure the relevance and appropriateness of the priority areas set out in the VET reform.

Further reading

Korpi, A., Hietala, R., Kiesi, J. & Rökköläinen, M. (2017). Ammatillisen koulutuksen osaamisperusteisuus, asiakaslähtöisyys ja toiminnan tehokkuus. Osaamisperusteisuuden tila. 'Competence-based, customer-oriented and efficient vocational education and training – state of competence-based approach.' Publications of the Government's analysis, assessment and research activities 85/2017. Prime Minister's Office.

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⁵ Prime Minister's Office (2015). Action plan for the implementation of the key projects and reforms defined in the Strategic Government Programme. Government Publications 1/2016.

⁶ Prime Minister's Office (2015). Finland, a land of solutions. Strategic Programme of Prime Minister Sipilä's Government 29 May 2015. Government Publications 12/2015.

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For more information about the evaluation, see:
osaamisperusteisuus.karvi.fi (in Finnish only)

The Competence-based, customer-oriented and efficient vocational education and training evaluation is part of the implementation of the 2016 Government plan for analysis, assessment and research.

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