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Please cite the original version: P. Tani, K. Komulainen, T. Eloranta, S. Gustafsson, T. Ylikoski (2015) FACILITATING THE TRANSITION FROM VET TO HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH THE "STUDY PATH", ICERI2015 Proceedings, pp. 3571-3576.

FACILITATING THE TRANSITION FROM VET TO HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH THE “STUDY PATH”

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Abstract

The need to reduce the length of studies is a current topic in both secondary vocational education and higher education in Finland. One opportunity for streamlining and speeding up the transition to university studies are “study paths”. Outlined by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Ministry of Culture in the operational and financial plan for 2016 – 2019, study paths aim to shorten the overall duration of studies and thereby accelerate the transition from higher education to working life. Prolonged studies in higher education have been a target for renovation since 2003. However, study paths between vocational qualifications and higher education, particularly polytechnic studies, have only recently been enacted. This is possible in the Finnish educational system, where successful completion of secondary vocational studies affords eligibility for higher education. While transition between these two levels is already operational, Finland wants to strengthen and streamline it further with student career guidance. The objective is to form smooth study paths and thus shorten the duration of studies.

Laurea University of Applied Sciences has launched a study path pilot project in the fall of 2014 with two vocational schools, where the aim is to build a “speedway” from vocational education and training to higher education. This takes place through integrating higher education and vocational studies. Studies offered by the polytechnic are made available to the VET students. Should a student want to apply for further education, these studies are eligible for the HE degree as well.

Study paths also allow VET students getting to know higher education. From a regional perspective, they also strengthen the presence and impact of Laurea University of Applied Sciences and its co-educational market position, so as to offer higher education opportunities in a greater region, meet the emerging needs of higher education and network with educational institutions in the region.

Interest in the study path has been great and the aim is to open study paths for each of Laurea's education programs. It is essential that the study path education offered takes place through non-binding studies. During the pilot project, two VETs, Porvoo Point College and Porvoo Vocational College, Amisto, have been the trailblazers for cooperation in health care studies. In 2016, Laurea's path studies are expanding to beauty care, correctional sector, business economics, the security industry, as well as business information technology. The vision is that around 100 students will enter Laurea through this path every year.

In the pilot stage, Laurea has chosen only certain study programs. In the cross-professional future, flexible and adaptable training is important for building a foundation for society-changing expertise. Thus, it would be natural that the students could choose a study path in accordance with their own needs and interests, which would not only deepen their skills, but also expand their professional skills over educational sectors. This, however, requires guidance to assist the VET student with the opportunities and choices along the path of study opportunities. In the future, course offerings will need to expand in the supporting study skills so that more VET students can be offered the skills needed in HE.

Keywords: secondary vocational education, higher education, study path, co-operation, student

1. INTRODUCTION

An investment in higher education is an investment in the future. Through higher education (HE) we are better equipped to answer to the economical challenges that Europe is facing. Availability of higher education is becoming a fundamental success factor [1]. However, education is costly, particularly when studies are prolonged and delayed. One factor to consider is the transitions that precede higher education.

In Finland, once students complete their basic education, they have the possibility to enter secondary education. This consists of general education and VET (vocational education and training). General education leads to the national matriculation examination and has a primarily academic focus, whereas VET leads to vocational qualifications. The transition from basic education to secondary education takes place usually at the age of 16, although both general education and VET are also offered as adult learning programs. VET programs are now the more popular, being the first option for over 50% of the applicants to secondary level studies.

Something that distinguishes Finland from many countries is that successful conclusion of vocational education affords eligibility to higher education. In other words, both general education and vocational education provide eligibility for further studies at universities of applied sciences (also termed polytechnics) and universities. In 2011, 20% of the students entering a university of applied science had previously completed a vocational qualification.

VET studies also offer students the option of studying for both a vocational qualification and the matriculation examination at the same time. This earns them a double qualification. Flexible transitions from one level of education to another are guaranteed in the legislation to avoid dead ends in the formal educational system.

To enable and facilitate such transitions, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture [2] has raised the unbroken running of studies and the transition to higher education as one central theme. The Ministry seeks to reduce the overall length of studies and speed up students' entry from HE into the labour market. A program to support faster study times in HE has been in effect since 2003. However, focus has only recently centred to the transition from VET to HE. Study paths designed to bridge secondary and higher education aim to increase these smooth transitions and reduce unnecessary delays. Programs supporting the transition greatly rely on the career guidance that a student receives.

For the purposes of this article, a "study path" describes a joint, integrated educational effort where a VET student engaged in a vocational programme is taking polytechnic studies as part of her VET degree. In addition to speeding up the studies, study paths also help introducing VET students to higher education. Study paths also serve as a vessel for educational networking, more timely responsiveness to regional educational needs, and as a means for strengthening the positions of participating educational institutions.

The study path from vocational education to higher education offers students an excellent opportunity to get to know higher education. Therefore, from the point of view of education provider in upper secondary vocational education and training, a study path can play a significant role in recruiting new students.

Upper secondary vocational colleges offer a number of choices for individualized study paths. The paths include for example Taitaja path as a part of Skills Finland competitions in the excellence of vocational skills, and also paths based on entrepreneurship and internationality. However, study paths between vocational qualifications and higher education, particularly polytechnic studies, have only recently been enacted, even though co-operation between the parties has long existed.

Finnish vocational education is increasingly measured based on students' graduation times and entry into further studies. VET institutions are eligible for a separate result-based financing scheme, which is intended to support this type of improvement. In the future, it is expected that the VET financing mechanism will support new, flexible types of joint programs. The future lies with individualised studies, where up to 100% of a student's studies may take place through cooperation with another institution.

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE PILOT PROJECT

Laurea University of Applied Sciences set a steering group to advance study paths in late 2014. Appointed by the steering group, a project team consisting of a development manager and senior lecturers in social services and health care, started work on a pilot project. In the first stage, the team collected information on past and current study path projects in Finland. This was performed to collect working practices and avoid downfalls that might compromise the project. There have been similar projects in Finland in the past, and some have encountered substantial difficulties that have caused issues in commitment to studies and completing them. During the pilot project, two VETs, Porvoo Point College and Porvoo Vocational College, Amisto, were selected for cooperation in health care and social services studies. Table 1 summarises the premises for the pilot project.

From the beginning the aim of the pilot was to design a simple and duplicable study path. Based on previous experiences, it was important to set realistic possibilities for carrying out the studies with non-binding studies, provide sufficient tutoring, career guidance and carry out successful student recruitment. In one previous project, e-learning appeared to have solved problems in merging secondary and higher education. Hence, online education was a natural way to provide the study path. In addition, there was an important concern for not jeopardizing a student's VET studies with the study path. [3,4]

Student	Unbroken studies Faster transition to work Practicing higher education studies Polytechnic studies as part of VET degree Later employment through recognition of previously acquired competence in HE
Amisto and Point College (VET)	Strengthening regional positions 10 credits from polytechnic studies to VET degrees Personal study plan New opportunities for motivated students to expand their capabilities
Laurea (HE)	Ensuring continuity of regional higher education Responding to regional needs Networking Financial compensation through open studies Mostly e-learning designs with no time and place restrictions

Table 1. The premises of the pilot project

It was also important to find a place for the study path in the vocational qualifications. The education offered on the study path is located in the vocational qualification as an optional module in order to advance or enhance vocational modules. In the pilot stage, participating students consist of practical nurse and social services students from vocational qualification in social and health care. These study 10 credits from the bachelor's degree in health care through Laurea Open University. Should a student want to apply for further education later on, these studies are eligible for the HE degree as well. As the study path is organised through the Open University, there is a fee incurred for every course. This has financial implications for the student, unless the originating VET institute chooses to offer a scholarship for the purpose. For the polytechnic, the design provides income.

It is possible for anyone to study in higher education through Open University. The difference in studying in this particular study path is the personal career guidance in the vocational college for including these path studies to the on-going VET studies, and also the tutoring in the HE during the path studies. Particular attention has been paid to guidance and tutoring because increased choices without guidance can cause feelings of insecurity and uncertainty in the student. These are important factors behind incompleteness of studies. After all, the aim of this study path is to speed up the studies in the long run, not to endanger the on-going vocational studies. [5]

The study path was designed to consist of studies found in the core competences of the degrees in Laurea University of Applied Sciences. An underlying assumption is that the VET student engages in further studies towards a bachelor's degree in health care or social services. This approach greatly differs from the general idea of Open University studies, where a student autonomously seeks and chooses studies from those available. In this sense, the study path emulates the student's future career path. Based on the findings in the pilot project, students have had a clear and stated intention towards these two degrees.

3. ASSESSMENT OF THE PROJECT

The purpose of the pilot project is to design an operational model for joint studies in secondary and higher education, and to facilitate the larger adoption of the model. On the other hand, the pilot is also about jointly developing student guidance in different educational institutions. During the pilot project, cooperation between participating institutions has clearly increased and an understanding of the other institutions' particular issues has vastly deepened.

Interest in the study path has been great and the aim is to open study paths for each of Laurea's education programs. In 2016, Laurea's path studies are expanding to beauty care, correctional sector, business economics, the security industry, as well as business information technology. The vision is that around 100 students will enter Laurea through this path every year.

The study path offers substantial potential for reducing the time needed for completing multiple degrees. A VET student having already taken multiple polytechnic courses as part of her VET degree need not engage in these studies again, should she enter the polytechnic in the future. For example, 30% of VET students in Finland's Point College enter higher education after completion of their studies. Joint studies taken in the study path can significantly shorten the time needed.

The study path also serves well for highly motivated students, who can use vacations and non-semester periods to advance their studies, thus further speeding graduation. It is also possible that the study path shortens the transition into work after completing higher education.

One key finding in the pilot project is that new designs must not endanger the student's VET studies. To support the student's possibility to continue in VET studies that require classroom attendance, it is essential that the study path takes place through non-binding studies. Non-binding studies require ability and commitment to self-directed studying. As the majority of students in the path studies are younger than the average HE students, they need support and tutoring. These are necessary in orientating to e-learning, the form of the non-binding studies, and furthermore, studies in higher education in general.

Tutoring is another key finding. As the study path demands skill and commitment to an individual, planned study of the student, tutoring has become paramount. The capabilities and learning skills needed in higher education, their assessment and development are vital to the success of the study path. Tutoring in the pilot project has included the support of tutoring teacher and also peer tutor, a higher education student. Tutoring takes mainly place within the e-learning platform and social media, but also during attendance days. These days focus on the skills needed in non-binding HE studies and are located outside the office hours to make sure the students have the possibility to take part.

A third key finding is the potential of e-learning. An e-learning platform is necessary to provide support for learning that takes place outside the typical hours in the VET institute. E-learning also serves as a

tutoring and peer support platform. Interestingly, the results indicate that as Lopez-Perez et al. [6] suggest, e-learning can help to prevent disruption of studies.

Student selection is another key ingredient in a successful implementation of a novel learning design. In the pilot study, student counsellors have taken a systematic and planned approach. This has clarified the student's career needs, motivation and made her survival skills more pronounced.

The pilot phase started with a limited number of study programs. In the cross-professional future, flexible and adaptable training is important for building a foundation for society-changing expertise. Thus, it would be natural that the students could choose a study path in accordance with their own needs and interests, which would not only deepen their skills, but also expand their professional skills across educational sectors. This, however, requires guidance to assist the VET student with the opportunities and choices along the path of study opportunities. In the future, course offerings will need to expand in both supporting study skills needed in HE and generic skills needed in the working life.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finland faces a need to reduce the rather lengthy study times that are typical in higher education. This article describes a pilot project that addresses the transitions before a student enters HE, and supports those when entering the labour market. The study path offers an integrated way of combining upper secondary VET studies with those in the higher education polytechnic sector.

Based on the pilot, the study path has appeared as a necessary instrument for improving transitions in education. Reducing the disruption points in studies and consequently, reducing the overall time needed produce skilled labour force to the market faster and economically more efficiently. The study path is also a meaningful way of increasing cooperation between VET and HE.

In addition to the primary purpose of speeding up studies, the study path also serves as a way for introducing higher education to students in vocational education and training. This also helps each student in assessing her capabilities in studying in a polytechnic.

The study path strengthens the institutions' position as regional developers. A commitment to ensuring routes for developing capabilities in a region is an important message in the European skill development discourse.

The media has warmly welcomed the cooperation. This has positive brand value effects for the institutions. The study path is also one potential way of improving the image of VET through offering more possibilities for motivated students and emphasising the further opportunities that are in the system.

The study path is a complex shared offering that requires openness, trust and agility. From the point of view of operational cultures, leadership and through developing joint structures, openness is needed. Trust, common culture and strategic partnership issues need active reinforcement. Creating trust requires sharing sensitive information, as otherwise the impediments to cooperation cannot be removed. Agility is needed in decision making for quick transitions of new designs into operation. Students' role in the development process is crucial and the final versions of the pilots need to be done based on assessment and students' customer experiences.

As the cooperation evolves, different organisational cultures meet. This is an opportunity for bidirectional learning, where competition transforms into joint action and regional development. The study path relies on an idea of shared leadership and learning organisation.[7] Participants are committed and willing in building a cooperative culture, where a common goal persists. This kind of concept building and service design requires co-operation skills, matching structures, similar pedagogical cultures, and most importantly, the will to just do it.

In the future, the study path will be expanded into new study areas and new partners. One possible future direction that is also very topical relates to the possibility of leveraging the study path to students of immigrant backgrounds, who could have great benefit of the study path. Immigrants often have

previous degrees, skills and experience, and the study path could serve as a way to facilitate integration into the Finnish society faster.

One future direction is the possibility to work the study path the other way around. Vocational training may have an untapped potential for providing degree components for polytechnic studies, as certain international findings suggest. [8]

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