Article

Administration Staff's Descriptions of Inclusion in Finnish Vocational Education and Training

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Abstract

Inclusion is understood in various ways in research, in documents guiding educational practices, and in stakeholders' speeches. This study contributes to the European discussion on the ambiguity of inclusion by investigating the descriptions of Finnish vocational education and training (VET) administration personnel both at the national and vocational institution levels. It gives light on the interconnections between participants' and Finnish and EU-level interpretations of inclusion in VET. We ask how the representatives of national educational administration and vocational institutions' administration describe inclusion. The data was collected in the spring of 2021 by interviewing representatives (N=18) of national educational

administration and vocational institution administration. We used Qvortrup and Qvortrup's (2018) definition of inclusion as our theoretical lens. The participants' descriptions of inclusion were constructed by portraying the significance of students' equity, equality, participation, accessibility, special support and belonging in the VET community at the numeric level but they lack consideration of students' activity in those communities and students' own experiences. The participants did not address the relevance of different social arenas of inclusion or exclusion in their descriptions, but they described VET colleges as one social system. Moreover, the participants did not reflect on the degree of being included or excluded. Their perspectives were constructed through the Finnish VET context, and they created a strong promise of education, which would provide equal opportunities for all to study and acquire competence according to the qualification requirements in VET. Their approaches were based rather on the identification of special needs students and their needs than on considerations for social cohesion, active citizenship and lifelong learning. This fostered the invitation for the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and the National Board of Education to define inclusion more precisely in VET so that the education providers would have an explicit framework and goals to advance inclusion in practice.

Keywords: Vocational education and training, administration, inclusion, equality, equity, content analysis

Introduction

According to the Education policy report of the Finnish Government (2021), the task of the public administration of education is to ensure citizens' rights and services without discrimination. Diversity in education and culture lay the foundation for equity and well-being, human development and a good life in Finland: Everyone has the right to learn and receive the support and guidance they need in education (Finnish Government, 2021). The pressure on policymakers to demonstrate how policies are leading toward greater educational inclusion results in the need for qualitative and quantitative studies (Ramberg & Watkins, 2020; Watkins et al., 2014). Earlier studies have indicated that education policymakers including vocational education and training (VET) colleges' administration staff must be committed to ensuring that VET forms an inclusive entity (e.g., Venäläinen, 2014; Watkins et al., 2014). Research evidence is needed to help them introduce, monitor and evaluate changes and to improve the effectiveness of inclusive policies. It will support them with the removal of barriers to learners' access to education and work and participation in the learning process. Reflexive collaboration, mutual understanding and shared values between stakeholders are fundamental to strengthening inclusion in VET practice (Ryökkynen & Raudasoja, 2022).

According to Hilt (2015) and Makoelle (2020), defining and operationalising inclusion is a multi-level task. Firstly, whether inclusion refers only to formal membership, for example in the school community or to an individual's active role in the community, and whether the individuals feel that they are recognised members of their community. Secondly, when defining inclusion, it is important to consider the various social communities and situations in which an individual in an educational institution belongs or from which they are excluded. The third issue to consider is the variation in experiences of inclusion in different social

contexts: it is important to note that an individual's inclusion varies from one context to another – the individual is never completely outside or within their communities, but this level varies. There are challenges in defining and implementing inclusion if there is no common view of these dimensions (Hilt, 2015). The success of inclusion requires a change in the educational institution, the operating culture, the ways of acquiring competence and learning, teaching and guidance, the roles of teachers and workplace instructors and encountering the students' individuality (cf. Naukkarinen, 2009). Inclusion includes changing values, attitudes, policies and practices in the school environment and beyond (cf. Polat, 2011).

The task of the education provider is to ensure sufficient resources for organising individual and inclusive VET. Its implementation requires the management of the teaching and guidance personnel's competence and the development of multidisciplinary cooperation to implement inclusive VET in the best possible way. The education provider also has the task of monitoring the results and effectiveness of the training through the feedback received, so that the quality of the education can be developed systematically (cf. The National Council for Special Education, 2011). Actors participating in a communal, inclusive process, such as students, teachers, instructors, workplace instructors, student welfare and representatives of the administration, play a role in multidisciplinary cooperation and the implementation of inclusion, in which shared understanding and cooperation are significant factors (Ryökkynen & Raudasoja, 2022). According to Pietiläinen and Alakoskela (2005), inclusion is enabled through legislation, decision-making, clear plans, staff training, appropriate practices and cross-border cooperation.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the Finnish VET administration staff's descriptions of inclusion. We ask: How do the representatives of national educational administration and vocational institutions' administration describe inclusion?

By investigating the VET administration staff's descriptions of inclusion, the study aims to shed light on the interconnections between the participants, the Finnish, and the EU-level interpretations of inclusion in VET. Thus, this study contributes to national and international discussions about the relevance of administration staff's adhesion to the principles of inclusion. We argue that it is essential that Finnish education policy gains insights and understanding from EU-level definitions of inclusive education policy and its effects. Inclusion research (e.g., Jørgensen et al., 2018; Schmid et al., 2021; Stolz & Gonon, 2012; Tsagalidis & Terning, 2018) carried out within the VET framework has been strengthened both at the national and international levels. However, in line with Thomas (2013), this study argues for a new kind of thinking and policy about inclusion. The development of inclusive education policy in Finland should be built on an understanding of the benefits of social connection and social capital because disregarding crucial issues of equality and social justice would lead to educational segregation, atomisation and intergenerational inheritance of social class (Tervasmäki et al., 2020). However, according to Värri (2007), understanding is

not enough to change the world, but we should consciously impact education's perspectives on social values.

Dimensions of inclusion in education

As a concept, inclusion first appeared in the UN Salamanca Statement, referring to the right of all disabled persons to be taught in the same classes as others (UNESCO, 1994). The concept is philosophical, political and normative, as it involves reflections on equality, equal opportunities, inclusion, humanity and ideologies (e.g., Alajoki, 2021; Florian, 2014; Paju, 2021). The paradigm of inclusion has changed slowly, but we can still see a paradigm related to special support and diversity (e.g., Makoelle, 2020; McGuire et al., 2006; Paju, 2021). In this study, the understanding of inclusion is broad-based, including the realisation of equality and equal opportunities in both education and society for all, not only for those with disabilities (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Thomas, 2013). From a narrow perspective, inclusion is seen as the placement of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms and meeting their social and academic needs. Whereas the broader understanding concerns all students, their social and academic needs and the creation of communities (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). It seems that it is challenging to explore inclusion in research and to achieve it in educational situations because context and individuals differ from situation to situation (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021). Because the concept of inclusion is context-bound, multidimensional and ambiguous, it is important to define what it means in the Finnish VET context.

To handle inclusion as a phenomenon that concerns all students in the Finnish VET context, we will use Qvortrup and Qvortrup's (2018) definition of inclusion which considers inclusion not only as physical and social dimensions of educational practices but also includes the psychological dimension – the students' experience of being included. The definition is based on three overlapping dimensions of inclusion: 1) Levels of inclusion, 2) Arenas of inclusion, and 3) Degrees of inclusion. Levels of inclusion in descriptions imply that inclusion is a matter of social participation and addresses the included student's sense of belonging to the VET community. Whereas arenas of inclusion imply that inclusion is not only being a member of the teaching and learning environments of the VET system but also implies other arenas related to the VET colleges like workplaces, break areas and canteens. From this perspective, inclusion and exclusion are a matter of basic social practices of all students in any social community related to the role of being a student. Finally, degrees of inclusion imply that a student is not just included and/or excluded but may be excluded to a certain degree because all inclusion implies exclusion (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018).

In the VET system, inclusion should be based on the VET actors' inclusive values, attitudes and professional ethics, taking into account the principles of sustainable development: equality, equal opportunities, accessibility, a lack of barriers and diversity, strengthening communality, inclusion and agency, and preventing discrimination (cf. Larsen & Thunqvist, 2018; Ryökkynen & Raudasoja, 2022). The inclusive

development of VET in Finland has meant shifting from education and training arranged for the needs of the majority, to competence-based education, which means that students' prior studies, work experience and special needs are identified and supported individually (Jokinen, 2018; European Council, 2020). Inclusion is promoted in Finnish VET through a variety of measures (Mäkinen et al., 2020; Räisänen & Goman, 2018). Before the start of actual VET studies, students have an opportunity to gain skills and knowledge in preparatory education and training for degree education. During VET studies, students can be offered studies that support their study skills if their basic skills are not sufficient to cope with the studies and complete the degree. According to the Act on VET (531/2017), students have the right to receive such instruction and guidance that enables the acquisition of the competence requirements (531/2017, §61). Furthermore, students are entitled to special needs support or intensive special needs support if they have learning difficulties, disabilities, illnesses or for other reasons (531/2017, §64 and §65).

Inclusion in the Finnish vocational education system and the EU's declarations and statements

In this section, we shed light on the recent Finnish and EU-level declarations and statements which are steering the Finnish education policy and thus, the administration and implementation of Finnish VET. The purpose of education policies and legislation is to ensure equal conditions of education for all. Education policies outline the activities of VET and their possibilities for implementing inclusion-based education, which is customer and workplace-oriented (cf. Ainscow & Messiou, 2017; Kettunen, 2021).

The Finnish Government's (2021) Education Policy Report is the most essential document guiding the Finnish education system (VNS 1/2021 vp.). However, the Education Policy Report mentions inclusion only as the right of persons with disabilities to learn (VNS 1/2021 vp.). The report specifies that upper secondary education, which includes VET and general secondary education, must be accessible to everyone. A personal competence development plan (PCDP) is made for each Finnish vocational student. Through this personalisation of VET studies, students' study paths are created in a way that meets students' objectives, capabilities, prerequisites and needs. In addition, students' basic skills and language skills will be strengthened, if necessary, before and during their VET studies. Students will be provided with student welfare services that meet their needs as part of VET. Furthermore, according to Finnish Non-discrimination Act (1325/2014), positive special treatment is a tool to enhance the fulfilment of equity and to alleviate structural disadvantages and barriers that are causing inequality in education.

On an EU level, according to the Bruges Communique (European Commission, 2011), the global vision for inclusive VET is to provide attractive and inclusive VET by promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship. The appropriate measures to ensure equal access especially for individuals or groups at risk of being excluded, whose participation in VET should also be supported through financial or other means and

the validation of non-formal and informal learning (European Commission, 2011). The Osnabrück Declaration on VET (European Commission, 2020) focuses on four main areas for the years 2021-2025: 1) Resilience and excellency through quality, inclusive and flexible VET which means that VET enables Finnish citizens to cope with change and to shape it; 2) Establishing a new lifelong learning culture which means that individuals benefit from career guidance throughout life, can engage in quality and inclusive VET programmes and acquire key competences to actively manage their education, training and employment phases with the support and increased responsibility of all stakeholders; 3) Sustainability which invites Finnish VET providers to embed skills for sustainability in their regulations and practices, and 4) European education and training area and international VET which urges European VET systems to promote a common European education and training area which would be recognised as a worldwide reference for vocational learners. Thus, the European Commission (2011, 2020) provides the VET field with a set of policy actions to complement and operationalise the vision and strategic objectives formulated in the Council Recommendation on VET. The Osnabrück Declaration requests that all objectives and actions should be implemented with due respect to the subsidiarity principle and following national VET circumstances (the European Commission, 2020).

The Council of Europe (2020) has also issued a recommendation that VET programmes should be easily accessible and engaging for all students, regardless of background. The transition from education to working life is supported by targeted measures and flexible forms of education, which also prevent dropping out of school. The same recommendation is committed to promoting inclusion, equal opportunities and social justice, as well as improving resilience and prosperity for all. Mapping the implementation of inclusive education policies would be a key factor in developing inclusive education systems (Ebersold & Watkins, 2011). However, there is no clear approach or method to fulfil this gap (Watkins et al., 2014). It seems that approaches are based on the identification of special needs students and subsequent support to meet their particular needs. The calls for evidence-based policy and resource allocation highlight the need for meaningful data related to all learners, not only students with special needs (Ebersold & Watkins, 2011).

In conclusion, the concept of inclusion always requires contextualisation to determine what works well and what works poorly in education (cf. Teittinen, 2005). Comprehensive implementation of inclusive principles in VET requires a stronger commitment by society, its communities and individuals to the objectives of inclusive VET decided at the national and EU-level. It requires that decision-makers have an inclusive understanding and a value-based willingness to make society's activities equal and inclusive, providing equal opportunities for all.

Methods

Aim of the study and participants

The study aims to analyse the descriptions of inclusion in Finnish VET by interviewing representatives of national educational administration and vocational institutions' administration. Furthermore, the study shed light on the interconnections between participants, the Finnish, and EU-level interpretations of inclusion in VET. The participants of the study (N=18) were 1) education administration experts (n=8) working with or well-informed about VET from the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC), the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI), and the regional state administrative agencies (AVI), and 2) representatives of the administration of vocational education institutions (n=10). Finnish MEC prepares the VET legislation and steers and supervises the sector. EDUFI implements statutes, steer the preparation of qualification requirements, and implements the qualification requirements. Furthermore, EDUFI provides the VET colleges with various decrees, instructions and guidance. AVI promotes students' legal protection. AVI deals with students' complaints and requests for rectification of educational evaluations. The interviewees had long work experience in various tasks including administration duties in the field of VET which was a significant premise for the study.

Semi-structured thematic interviews were used as the method for collecting the data, whereby the responses were not bound to certain pre-specified response options, and the interviewees were provided with the opportunity to answer the questions in their own words (Hirsjärvi et al., 2004). Two sets of questions were used in the interviews of this study, one for experts in education administration and one for representatives of the administration of vocational education institutions. The common themes of both target groups were the definition of inclusion and the visibility of inclusion in strategies and documents, practical activities and as the object of evaluation. The interview protocols consisted of target group pertinent questions about how inclusive principles were available in their daily work or VET colleges' visions and strategies, what resources VET providers and VET staff must implement in inclusive education, how evaluation is carried out and how participants would inclusively develop the VET system. These themes guided the discussion and motivated the interviewees to talk about their experiences and thoughts about inclusion (Hirsjärvi et al., 2004).

The design of the study was carried out by a research team whose expertise included knowledge of VET, teacher education, special needs education, project management, and administration. Working in a research team provided us with an opportunity to carry out the analysis together and discuss interpretations. At the beginning of the research process, the interviewees were contacted directly by the members of the research team. Subsequently, the research team members gave the contact details of the persons who agreed to the interview to the project researcher, who conducted the actual interviews.

Before starting the research interview, the background information of the study was reviewed with the interviewees, and they were informed about the reporting of the material. The material was anonymised by removing all identifiers. The research applied data acquisition, research and evaluation methods that meet the criteria of scientific research and that are ethically sustainable, following the requirements set for scientific knowledge (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, 2019). The data was collected in the spring of 2021.

Data analysis

Content analysis was used as a qualitative research method to drill down to the participants' descriptions (Schreirer, 2012). The data consist of open responses received from thematic interviews, which are used to describe inclusion. Furthermore, we strived to find out how equal opportunities and equality are discussed, which themes are consistent in the responses, and which are different in the responses of the two groups of respondents. At the beginning of the analytical process, the transcribed material was carefully read (Hinchman & Moore, 2013). After this intensive reading, the qualitative material was categorised based on the responses, whereby the material was reduced and grouped thematically by combining observations. Thematisation refers to the division of material into initial content categories based on similarity, i.e. a common feature. Finally, we looked at these categories in light of Qvortrup and Qvortrup's (2018) dimensions of inclusion.

Results

In this section, we address how representatives of the administration level describe inclusion and the interconnections between the participants' descriptions and the Finnish and EU-level interpretations of inclusion in VET. The responses from each of the two groups interviewed were so similar and are, hence, merged in the reported results.

How do the representatives of the national educational administration and vocational institutions' administration describe inclusion?

Representatives of the educational administration and the administration of VET defined inclusion through engagement, accessibility, equality, equal opportunities, integration, belonging to the community and society, prevention of discrimination and special support. According to the respondents, the realisation of inclusion required the actors to have the right attitude, values, competence and ability to meet a diverse body of students.

Accessibility was highlighted very diversely in the interviewees' responses. Some emphasise design-for-all thinking (European Institute of Design and Disability, 2004) so that the diversity of students is taken into account when planning education programmes. In this case, inclusion was seen as a lack of barriers,

accessibility and usability in various educational services. Other respondents approached accessibility through a physical, psychological, social and pedagogical dimension, and their responses emphasised the students' PCDPs which create the core of the Finnish VET implementation and the various practical solutions associated with them that can be used to support students in enabling their studies. One of the respondents described accessibility as follows:

> Inclusion requires those individual and flexible study paths so that each individual's needs for support are identified, and support measures and special arrangements are enabled so that this individual can achieve those goals. And education and training must be accessible to everyone. (Interviewee 14)

The responses highlighted the education provider's statutory obligation to promote gender equality in all its activities and to ensure that no one is discriminated against due to gender, gender identity and gender expression. The respondents emphasised equal and gender-sensitive structures that ensure equal opportunities for everyone to study both in educational institutions and workplaces while promoting inclusion. Equality must also be taken into account in actual teaching and various learning materials so that they support the implementation of the Equality Act (FINLEX, 1986). A respondent described the promotion of equality as an opportunity to learn:

> The different backgrounds and characteristics of people...would be seen as a good thing... that should be taken into account and through which...others could learn something new, and that being together would be more diverse. (Interviewee 16)

In the participants' responses, inclusion was described through the contents of the Non-Discrimination Act (FINLEX, 2014). They emphasised the equal value of people regardless of their age, gender, citizenship, origin, language, religion, state of health, disability, sexual orientation or other personal reasons. The focus was on the view that everyone should be equally able to use education services and have access to employment. For the respondents, this meant that the conditions of vocational education and training be built to support everyone's learning. According to a respondent's view:

> Inclusion means that everyone belongs together, meaning that we don't differentiate between different learners; everyone can learn together. (Interviewee 5)

Informants of the study also perceived inclusion in VET as a means of preventing discrimination, to support equal opportunities. Among the respondents, the general educational task of VET and working in its different operating environments and communities were considered important methods of preventing discrimination. Prevention of discrimination was also associated with the implementation of the Equality Act (FINLEX, 1986) and the development of gender-sensitive practices. A respondent described inclusion:

> It is...prevention of discrimination. (Interviewee 2)

Inclusion was also defined in the responses as belonging to a community and society. The responses emphasised the promotion of good relations between the population by influencing attitudes, supporting equal opportunities and equality, and increasing participation in educational institutions, workplaces and society in general. In their descriptions, a positive attitude towards diversity created a foundation of respect and trust between people in different operating environments. The respondents emphasised the students' ability to participate in education, the right to be part of a community and group through it and to feel valued as an individual. For example, belonging to different learning communities:

> We aim to encourage the progress of studies, offer different types of support and enable well-being in different learning environments. This calls for intensive guidance collaboration both among our college staff and with work-life representatives. (Interviewee 2)

The responses also described inclusion through integration so that each person has the right to participate in VET and to use it to find their place to be and act in different communities, employment and society. What emerged as the goal of integration was securing experiences of inclusion for everyone, to promote people's attachment to different groups and operating environments. Integration also supported the educational mission of education providers by supporting the development of students' identity so that everyone could feel valuable in a group and community. In the responses, integration was also connected to supporting the integration of immigrants through securing jobs and participation in Finnish society. Integration was also described as the students' right to belong to a group:

> The first thing that comes to mind is the word integration, the notion that everyone has the right to study together. (Interviewee 4)

The respondents also perceived and, according to their own words, associated inclusion as a matter related to special support and its implementation in VET. As a rule, special needs support is provided in general vocational institutions in Finland. However, the interviews also included a critical examination of the role of vocational special educational institutions and the justification for their existence in the era of inclusion. Special support and related pedagogical competence were also considered important from the perspective of extended compulsory education. According to the respondents, individual study paths were designed for each student taking into account their need for special support. Among some education providers, inclusion was seen as providing special needs support, as shown in the following extract:

> We don't talk about inclusion, but we always talk about organising that special support and what it means. (Interviewee 8)

The results of the study demonstrated that the concept of inclusion was defined in very different ways, as it is not defined in the Finnish educational policy guidelines. For this reason, each respondent interpreted it based on their own premise.

The interconnections between the participants' descriptions and the Finnish vocational education and the EU-level interpretations of inclusion in VET

According to the respondents, promoting inclusion through participation must be considered in both structures and strategies so that it affects the operating culture and practices of educational institutions. Inclusion is visible in strategies through social sustainable development, which is included in the United Nations sustainable development Agenda 2030. The aim is to embed inclusion at the strategy level as part of day-to-day activities, and this is manifested in enabling inclusive education for all students. Participation was reflected in the responses as interactive activity, in which each student had their place and an important role as part of the various VET communities in both the educational institution and the workplace. VET plays an important role in promoting participation and student well-being, but cooperation networks in VET, such as workplaces, various associations and organisations as well as leisure time actors, were also seen as important partners in strengthening inclusion, where the most advanced education providers had also taken inclusive thinking. The respondents also connected inclusion with an educational task arising from VET legislation, as shown in the following material extract:

> A really important task [in VET] alongside skills and competence acquired is that it also supports young people to grow, to become citizens and to participate in general. (Interviewee 11)

Discussion

Our earlier study (Ryökkynen & Raudasoja, 2022) indicated that inclusion is manifested as a broad set of activities without a clear, uniform definition and direction in Finnish VET representatives' interpretations. The study created a need to scrutinise the representatives' interpretations more closer. First, the purpose of this study was to investigate the administration staff's descriptions of inclusion in Finnish VET and second, to shed light on the interconnections between their descriptions and the Finnish and EU-level interpretations of inclusion in VET. Next, we will discuss the results in light of the earlier studies and our theoretical background where Qvortrup and Qvortrup's (2018) dimensions for inclusion create the lenses through which we will deliberate on our results.

Based on the results, the paradigm shift in inclusion from the old special needs support paradigm toward the inclusion paradigm was explicit and in line with the results of, e.g. McGuire et al. (2006) and Makoelle (2020). Respondents described inclusion from the perspectives of equal opportunity, equality and inclusiveness, which support the new paradigm of inclusion. However, some descriptions connected inclusion to special needs support, as Paju (2021) has also observed in her research. This was reflected in the inclusion of students in VET by integrating them into other student groups and providing them with special needs support in these groups. As a whole, the paradigm shift was seen as a transition towards more inclusive VET and different learning environments, in which the students acquire competence instead

of focusing on their needs for special support (cf. Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). However, the descriptions lack an operational definition for inclusion which would make it realisable in VET practice and match the conceptual definition.

The participants described inclusion at the numeric level through different types of social communities to which students are entitled to belong (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). However, their descriptions lack concern for the degree of being included, which means that the participants' replies did not differentiate between degrees of students' inclusion or exclusion. The participants did not discuss students' experiences of inclusion and exclusion, or their sense of belonging or activity in their studying. They depicted inclusion ambiguously through accessibility, equality, equal opportunities, integration, belonging to a VET college community, work life and society, prevention of discrimination and special needs support. The participants narrated students' opportunities to gain vocational competence and to be a member of different learning environments in vocational colleges and workplaces. However, they did not point out a VET college as a social system, which includes many types of social communities where students may be included or excluded to different degrees (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). In addition, their descriptions lack the consideration of supporting equal access through financial means and through validation of non-formal and informal learning which was highlighted in the Bruges Communique by the European Commission (2021). In line with the previous research results (e.g., Alajoki, 2021; Florian, 2014; Paju, 2021), the participants' descriptions of inclusion were philosophical, political and normative. The descriptions were linked to the Finnish education policy's ideologies of equal opportunity, equality, inclusiveness and humanity.

As Qvortrup and Qvortrup (2018), Teittinen (2005) and Makoelle (2020) have stated, inclusion and exclusion form, in practice and as a concept, a multi-layered and context-bound phenomenon. The individualisation of VET and the support and guidance included in it can be used to provide students with individual coping strategies to support their participation and agency towards full membership in society and employment, which operationalises inclusion at its different levels and connects it with the different types of social communities. In their research, Larsen and Thunqvist (2018) highlight this as a strength of VET from the perspective of inclusion. However, the end of the education may lead to exclusion unless a network has been created for the student during the education that can support them with interfaces related to a good life, employment and/or further studies. In practice, inclusion should be built locally in dialogue and practices between different actors that support the student holistically.

From the perspective of education policy, our research results challenge the Finnish National Agency for Education and the Ministry of Education and Culture to define the concept of inclusion in the Finnish context of VET which measures the EU-level policies (European Commission, 2011, 2020, 2021). The Finnish education policy documents refer to inclusion, but even in these documents, it has not been defined. A thorough definition of the concept of inclusion would provide VET administration and providers of

vocational education with a uniform framework for promoting inclusion. Each actor would benefit from defining the concept when implementing inclusive VET. In line with earlier studies (Venäläinen, 2014; Watkins et al., 2014), the study argues that education policymakers, including VET colleges' administration staff, must be committed to mutual understanding, ensuring that VET forms an inclusive entity.

While the number of respondents in this study can be considered a limitation, it also sheds light on the perspectives of the educational administration and educational institution administration on inclusion and its impacts on the activities of vocational upper secondary education and training institutions. In the future, the research could be targeted even more specifically at those VET practices that are used to implement inclusive policies in practice instead of ambiguous concepts.

In conclusion, we state that it is difficult to define inclusive vocational upper secondary education because the concept of inclusion alone is multidimensional, ambiguous and diverse, as this research also demonstrates. However, it would be meaningful if the concept of inclusion were studied and, as a result, clarified, summarised and limited in a context-specific manner. Such a process of definition that builds a common understanding can help dispel some misunderstandings and abandon a wide range of assumptions and personal interpretations, and direct thinking towards a common, mutually agreed, modern description of inclusion and genuinely respond to the educational promise.

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