

Key findings on the state of students' equality and equity in vocational education and training

Abstract

This snapshot report contains information on factors that affect students' equality and equity in vocational education and training and its transition phases. The aim of the report is to serve the promotion and development of equality in education. The snapshot should be kept up to date as part of the authorities' task of promoting equality. By their nature, most of the development needs highlighted in the snapshot are beyond the direct competence of the Finnish National Agency for Education, which can mainly resort to information steering in cooperation with a variety of actors.

The challenges associated with the divergence of education paths largely lead back to issues of guidance and support, solutions to which should be sought in cooperation with stakeholders. For example, transitions from basic education diverge by gender and language, and strong gender segregation persists in vocational qualifications. Strong sectoral segregation is also reflected in sexual and gender minorities' entrance in education and career choices. Issues relating to students with an immigrant background include education providers' capacity to support students, for example by means of language-aware instruction and guidance.

In the context of the education and employment pathways of children and young people with disabilities, particular attention has been focused on whether these children and young people are guided to education paths indicated by their strengths, whether their opportunities for entering and working in different occupations are genuinely examined, and whether there is an awareness of reasonable accommodation referred to in the Non-Discrimination Act. In more general terms, concerns have been expressed over young students' access to sufficient instruction and guidance. High-quality implementation of the learning support reform, both at educational institutions and in the world of work, will play a key role in securing different learners' studies and paths forward.

Whereas the majority of students find their learning environment safe, the snapshot indicates that the need to pay attention to ensuring a safe learning environment has not gone away. Experiences of bullying and discrimination also differ by gender and background. When seeking solutions for preventing and tackling them, it would be advisable to pay attention to the local practices and ways of speaking at the educational institution, which may also be underpinned by broader societal and historical phenomena.

Education providers are subject to a number of planning duties, including an obligation to draw up student welfare, equality and equity plans. The quality and impact of these plans vary. Examining the planning obligations and their fulfilment as a whole would be important. Developing knowledge-based management will be essential, and information on students' well-

being, participation and learning collected locally from different sources as part of the snapshot information will be crucial for targeting development measures.

1. Conclusion and further reflection

The purpose of the present snapshot report is to serve as a background memorandum for planning measures that promote equality and equity. The snapshot reflects interpretations of the state of equality made while collecting and analysing the data. Some of the identified needs could already be addressed when the snapshot was being compiled, and guidelines, communication and support for implementation could be developed.

By their nature, most of the development needs highlighted in the snapshot are beyond the direct competence of the Finnish National Agency for Education, which can mainly resort to information steering in cooperation with a variety of actors. A key role is played by education providers. The following sections discuss themes that emerged during the mapping, to which it would be important for education providers to pay attention as part of their management and provision of education and training.

2. Developing school culture and structures

Making full use of education providers' planning duties

Education providers are subject to different planning duties and guided by the institution's strategy, and it is important to ensure that they add up to a whole that supports welfare, non-discrimination and equality work in institutions. Key planning obligations include preparing a student welfare plan, equality and equity plan and school rules. A previous study found major variations in the quality of the plans, and their use as part of the management system could often be improved, which would also enhance the impact of the planning instruments.

A report on operational equality planning (Finnish National Agency for Education 2025)¹ proposed that institutions could discuss the extent to which the education provider and the institution produce a common knowledge base and a system of knowledge-based management in order to fulfil the equality planning obligation and other planning duties. Especially for the purposes of the education provider's student welfare plan, information must be collected and examinations conducted on such issues as the students' learning, health and well-being, interaction and participation, health and safety of their environment, and accessibility. At best, addressing different grounds for discrimination while carrying out the examinations required under the Equality Act and Non-Discrimination Act would create synergies and enhance overall evaluation for the purposes of developing the activities.

While a national knowledge base compiled by an authority may throw light on general trends, each actor's strengths and development needs can only be assessed, and development measures targeted, locally and at the level of institution or unit. It is essential to collect information at the level of educational institutions or units from different sources and on different grounds of discrimination, including directly from students. By conducting their own evaluations of the state of equality, actors can identify who is at risk of being excluded from education and the

¹ [Toiminnallinen tasa-arvo ja yhdenvertaisuussuunnittelu.pdf](#) (Operational equality planning, only available in Finnish)

community, or what kind of support measures should be strengthened to ensure that students' education paths leading to the world of work or further studies are secured as indicated by their strengths.

For their part, education providers should be able to provide a safe learning environment in the institution, and also together with employers when competence is acquired in the workplace. Student feedback indicates that education providers do not always intervene sufficiently in bullying or harassment. Education providers also have a duty to identify structural factors and practices that may challenge the progress of different learners' studies as indicated by their strengths. These factors may be associated with the staff's competence and understanding, communication or, for example, the practices for cooperation with guardians or stakeholders.

Experiences of discrimination erode trust in society and undermine the individual's perception of participation and being heard as well as their possibilities of exerting influence. Experiences of social exclusion may also increase the risk of radicalisation or seeking out communities that reinforce extremism. When looking at bullying, harassment and discrimination, we should pay attention to the broader societal and historical phenomena in their background and examine these phenomena locally in the practices and ways of speaking at the institutions. For example, they may be underpinned by racist perceptions or geographical and economic inequalities². A research project known as RILSE³ found that racism in schools is often structural, and identification of and intervention in racism must not be left to individual actors. For enduring solutions, management commitment, clear practices and sufficient resources are required.

Transition phase cooperation, multidisciplinary cooperation and proactive guidance

Several of the snapshot findings are related to high-quality and adequate guidance and support in the transition phases of education: multidisciplinary cooperation initiated at a sufficiently early stage is emphasised in the guidance of learners who need support. If necessary, multidisciplinary guidance addresses the student's individual needs and goals as they progress on their learning path. Transition phase cooperation is particularly important for those young people who are expected to face challenges in either their transition or attachment to upper secondary education.

Creating practices is the key to developing education providers' transition phase and multidisciplinary cooperation. As a tool can, for instance, be used a guidance plan that describes the activities related to transitions and transition phase cooperation, structures for organising guidance, practices, division of duties and responsibilities, as well as evaluation and development. Providers of basic education and vocational education and training should agree on guidance responsibilities and support forms in the transition phase, ensuring that students receive the support and guidance they need. It is important to collect and make use of feedback on the effectiveness and practices of the cooperation.

² See [Kiusaamistutkimuksen historia ja tutkimuksen yksipuolistumisen haasteet | Kasvatus & Aika](#) (History of research in bullying and challenges of one-sided research, only available in Finnish)

³ [Racism and antiracism in lower secondary schools \(RILSE\) | Diversity, multilingualism and social justice in education | University of Helsinki](#). While the study focused on lower secondary schools, its key findings can also be generalised to the upper secondary level.

Developing and monitoring support for learning

Under updated legislation on support for learning, from 1 August 2026 support will be organised as part of education leading to a qualification in vocational education and training. Under the updated legislation, learning support in vocational education and training will consist of support for learning and special needs support. When implementing this reform, it will be important for the education provider to monitor and assess if the staff have a shared understanding of the principles of learning support and to determine what kinds of structures and practices the education provider has for such purposes as organising remedial teaching.

Regarding special needs support, the education provider should establish if the students and the guardians or legal representatives of minors are genuinely heard, and if they are provided with comprehensible and accessible information on their rights and options.

When used correctly, the possibility of adjusting assessment and deviating from assessment criteria is a way of supporting a student in their studies on their way to the world of work. If done needlessly, this may be detrimental, should the student wish to go on to further studies that would lead them to an employment path indicated by their strengths. The education provider should consequently also pay attention to ensuring that the students and the guardians or legal representatives of minors understand the outcomes of administrative decisions for further studies and employment.

The delivery of learning support and special needs support should be systematically monitored and evaluated as part of the education provider's quality management and equality work. The monitoring data should be used for developing the activities and supporting the progress of students' studies. Monitoring carried out by the education provider is important to ensure that support is also provided during on-the-job learning. In addition to the progress of studies and further placement, the monitoring should also cover demonstrations and whether they are given in the workplace or at educational institutions. Regarding adaptation of competence assessment and deviating from vocational skills requirements or learning outcomes, monitoring their spread between different qualifications and units would be important.

National-level monitoring will be carried out by the Ministry of Education and Culture: a report on the delivery of learning support in vocational education and training to be produced three years after the legislative amendments enter into force will create an important national framework for further development of learning support.

Provision of reasonable accommodation (section 15 of the Non-Discrimination Act)

Concerns were raised through different channels over education providers not always being aware of their duties to provide for reasonable accommodation referred to in the Non-Discrimination Act for students. Under the Non-Discrimination Act, an education provider has to make due and appropriate adjustments necessary in each situation for a person with disabilities to be able, equally with others, gain access to education (1325/2014, section 15)⁴. In student admissions, for example, this means accessibility solutions suitable for all applicants on the one hand and, on the other, reasonable individual solutions and special arrangements. Awareness should consequently be raised among education providers of reasonable accommodation referred to in the Non-Discrimination Act.

⁴ From a terminological viewpoint, care should be taken not to confuse reasonable accommodation with the adaptation of competence assessment enabled by vocational education and training legislation.

Based on the mapping exercise, paying attention to education providers' awareness of the obligation to provide for reasonable accommodation when applying SORA legislation (legislation on unsuitability to study) continues to be necessary. The Finnish National Agency for Education can also highlight the importance of this issue and good practices as part of implementing SORA solutions⁵.

Language proficiency requirements and support for learning the language of the qualification

The Finnish National Agency for Education has been contacted a relatively large number of times about the language proficiency requirements in qualification requirements and skills required of students in the qualification language. The qualification requirements always define the linguistic competence required in each qualification and unit. Demonstrations of competence in vocational education and training are always given in the language of the qualification. Competence in other languages may also be included in vocational skills requirements or learning outcomes. The level of language proficiency required for acquiring sufficient vocational skills may also be quite high. Good linguistic abilities are important from the viewpoint of not only further education but also the world of work and civic participation.⁶ Linguistic skills are improved in both common and vocational qualification units.

The Ministry of Education and Culture's policies on developing vocational education and training highlight improving the Finnish or Swedish language instruction of foreign-language students as one of the goals. Language proficiency development can be supported by means of optional vocational units included in the qualification and in areas of common vocational units. It is also important for education providers to pay attention to ensuring that supporting language proficiency development and language-aware instruction and guidance are a common goal for all teachers. Workplace instructors should also be offered support for providing language-aware guidance.

National knowledge base for evaluating equality in vocational education and training

Relatively few studies and reports have been produced on vocational education and training, particularly from the viewpoint of monitoring the education and employment paths of various minority groups. Different parties should continuously maintain situational awareness and evaluate development needs. In compliance with the Equality Act and Non-Discrimination Act, the authorities should also actively investigate and obtain information on factors that prevent the realisation of equality and equity. This information lays the foundation for developing actions and policies for removing obstacles. The Finnish National Agency for Education's operational equality and equity plan consequently includes the built-in practice of highlighting the perspectives of equality and equity in data production to support decision-making. At the very least, this means that we look at various background variables in the knowledge base we produce and in the separate studies, evaluations, snapshots and reports we prepare. Target groups' participation should also be addressed in data production.

⁵ The Ministry of Education and Culture is drafting a government proposal on reforming the SORA legislation. This proposal will be based on development needs identified in the final report of the SORA project appointed by the Ministry of Education and Culture.

⁶ The Ministry of Education and Culture has initiated a study on whether vocational education and training provides sufficient capabilities for further studies or civic participation. [Ammatillisen koulutuksen opiskelijoiden kielitaitoa selvitetään - OKM - Ministry of Education and Culture](#) (Study on VET students' language proficiency, in Finnish)

More inputs from different parties will be needed to make structural challenges and solutions visible and to secure the education paths of groups that are under-represented in education and learners facing discrimination. There are plenty of information and research gaps, one example of which is the need to update the information on Roma students' education paths to upper secondary level and beyond. Information on such topics as the realisation of linguistic rights along the education path is similarly lacking.

3. Qualification requirements are being developed to address equality perspectives

Preparing qualification requirements in cooperation with businesses and employers, education providers and other stakeholders is one of the Finnish National Agency for Education's core tasks. Vocational qualification units describe the competence required in each occupation. The compulsory vocational units of many valid qualifications include competences related to work processes, the purpose of which is to ensure that the student has skills in equal and equitable action in the work community or customer interface.

To address these perspectives systematically, the Vocational Education and Training unit introduced guidelines on 'vocational skills requirements for socially sustainable VET' in 2025 and included them in instructions for preparing the contents of qualification requirements. They are intended to be used as such or modified to suit an individual qualification requirement project. The purpose of the instructions is to ensure that key competences for operating in a diverse work community and customer interface as well as competences that promote inclusion, safety and well-being are included in all qualification requirements. When preparing each set of qualification requirements, it should additionally be assessed when, from the workplace perspective, it is justified to spell out vocational skills requirements in which competence is verbalised separately from the viewpoints of different grounds for discrimination, for example when it is important to identify different forms of harassment or violence that is gendered or targets minorities.

To support the process of updating qualification requirements, an impact assessment tool was developed and introduced in 2025. This tool is intended for supporting the work on qualification requirements and ensuring that jointly agreed perspectives are taken on board at the very beginning of the work: in order to make an impact, it must be ensured that actions derived from the goals are taken into account in the qualification requirement process. The tool is underpinned by the Government's Guidelines for Impact Assessment in Law Drafting⁷, according to which several impact categories have been accounted for, expressed in concrete terms and considered in the Finnish National Agency for Education's qualification requirement projects. In terms of impacts on equality, ensuring different stakeholders' participation in the preparation of the requirements is essential: if the student should have competence in working with some special groups, such as clients with disabilities, hearing organisations that represent these clients is part of the process. The person preparing qualification requirements should also assess if the reform has links to national linguistic and cultural minorities' right to maintain and develop their language and culture and consider how this is addressed in the vocational skills requirements. To ensure the accessibility of the qualification requirements, attention is focused on plain and

⁷ <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/handle/10024/164423>

accessible language. Making sure that gendered terms are not used in the requirements is one aspect of this.

A precondition for turning the vocational skills requirements contained in the qualification requirements into competence is that the teaching and guidance personnel have the skills in identifying and accounting for phenomena in their professional work. There may be major variations in this area, which was highlighted in such as a 2025 report on the state of democracy and human rights education. Education providers should ensure that the teaching staff have sufficient competence in and understanding of various phenomena and concepts. The Finnish National Agency for Education can facilitate this by means of information steering, by supporting implementation, and by producing support materials for education providers.



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