

Finland: Paving the Way for Youngsters Entering VET (JOPA)

Type of provider

Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, a polytechnic, offers a range of courses and degrees in Finnish and English. Haaga-Helia also educates vocational teachers (School of Vocational Teacher Education) and coordinates the JOPA project, initially carried out in the schools of the City of Vantaa.

Objectives

From 2006 onwards, JOPO (joustava perusopetus– flexible basic education) has offered a model for completing basic education through learning in practice. JOPA (peruskoulusta joustavasti ammattiin– paving the way for youngsters entering VET) seeks to strengthen the cooperation between vocational teachers, basic school teachers and companies, as well as smooth out the transition between basic education and upper secondary education. It began as a feasibility study (2016-2017) involving JOPO students and other groups. The project continues.

Assessment approaches

Learning by doing, learning in practice, linking school subjects to the real world and matching the learning with the curriculum.

Target Group

The target group for JOPO is students aged around 14-16, at a risk of becoming dropouts. JOPA involves both JOPO students and other groups, such as immigrants, who may be older. Both models target especially youths who find schools a challenging learning environment and benefit from modules out of school (10% of the age group), but would be suitable for any student who wants to develop their practical skills.

Potential transferability/ scalability

State money and support necessary. The Finnish National Agency for Education is involved in financing JOPO, which is offered by the municipalities; the JOPA project is financed by the Ministry of Education and Culture. Requires cooperation between educational institutions and workplaces, also at the individual level.

Summaries or Basic elements of analysis

Model for completing basic education, particularly for youths who risk dropping out of school without a basic education certificate. Learning occurs at the workplace, in practical situations. Plans for expanding the model, so that any school could offer JOPA as a possible educational path for any student, whatever their background and academic performance. Traditional thinking (set teaching and group schedules, mental distance between schools and workplaces, unwillingness to cooperate) is one obstacle. Companies may be very eager to participate.

Introduction in keywords

- Paving the Way for Youngsters Entering VET (JOPA)
- Finland
- model for completing basic education at the workplace
- cooperation between schools and companies
- smoothing out the transition between basic education and vocational education
- especially for youth who risk becoming dropouts without basic education certificates
- learning occurs in practical situations at the workplace

5 areas descriptive text

Organisation and Description of the tool(s) (which skills are assessed)

Traditionally, there has been little cooperation between, on the one hand, basic education and working life, and on the other hand, basic education and vocational education, which are separated in Finland. Virve Vainio, a teacher of vocational teacher students from Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences – a polytechnic that also educates vocational teachers in both Finnish and English – is interested in bridging these gaps. JOPO (joustava perusopetus– flexible basic education) already offered a model for youths completing basic education through learning outside school, in practical situations. Vainio and Kari Viinisalo – retired from the Helsinki City Education Department, formerly in charge of apprenticeships – have been cooperating on the JOPA project. The idea behind JOPA (peruskoulusta joustavasti ammattiin– paving the way for youngsters entering VET) is to strengthen the cooperation between vocational teachers, basic school teachers and companies, as well as to smooth out the transition between basic education and upper secondary education for the students. Haaga-Helia coordinates JOPA, initially carried out in the schools of the City of Vantaa.

Implementation (how the tool is used, how the assessors are trained, how often it is used)

The curriculum and school subjects sometimes seem so far removed from the outside world that it is difficult to understand how they apply to practical, everyday situations – where do we see, for instance, physics at the workplace? “Everybody has this dichotomy in their mind. If you have to learn, you have to go to school to learn,” Vainio explains. However, it is possible to change this mindset and understand that you can learn in your work. Viinisalo points out that the parties involved in JOPA eventually “began to see the workplace for the perspective of learning”.

In JOPA, learning is evaluated from three sides: that of the employer, the basic school teacher and the vocational school teacher. The students receive credit for their work in their basic education studies, but they can also use it later in their prospective vocational education; the curricula of basic education and

vocational education overlap here in a way. Vainio advocates the idea of matching the learning that has occurred to the curriculum afterwards, rather than vice versa. Viinisalo speaks of the inclusivity of flexible education and training, both in basic and vocational education, and of schools adapting to different kind of students, not the other way around.

JOPA began as a feasibility study (2016-2017), but continues through cooperation with the University of Helsinki and subject teacher education. The project will involve JOPO students and mathematics and language teacher students from the University of Helsinki doing their teaching practice outside schools, at workplaces, which is highly unusual in Finland.

Description of the target groups

Vainio emphasises a holistic view of learning; schools offer only limited learning environments, which are not ideal for every student. She tells us that a pupil who is unmotivated in school and getting into conflicts with the teachers can get on very well at the workplace. In fact, the prototype for a JOPA student is someone who is active and willing to participate, whose social skills may be quite good. According to estimations, 10% of the student body struggles in a school environment and would benefit from a model like JOPA.

JOPA focuses on the last years of basic education, students in middle school aged around 14-16, who risk dropping out of school without a basic education certificate. Although the JOPA project strongly involved JOPA students, it also included immigrant students, under and over the age of 20. In the future, the model could more widely be offered for immigrants.

There are hopes of expanding the model, so that JOPA would function as one way of completing basic education, widely available regardless of the students' backgrounds or academic skills. In one school, the principal already asked all the eighth grade students about their interest in participating in JOPA. Of some 140-150 students, 36 students expressed an interest; 16 of them were eventually selected to participate in the project.

Policy context

The transition phase between basic education and upper secondary education has been a source of worry for the Finnish government. Directing resources towards JOPO and similar enterprises nevertheless saves money in the end – and sometimes also shortens the educational paths of the youths, because of the skills that they have developed at the workplace.

Flexible basic education receives financing from the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Agency for Education; the ministry finances the JOPA project.

Companies have been eager to cooperate. So have entire fields, such as the automotive industry, which has ties to a number of other fields and jobs, from maintenance to car sales. JOPA offers companies the chance to school good workers, but employers are also motivated by social responsibility. Although smaller companies are often more suitable for apprenticeships, as they offer more personal tuition, JOPA has had good experiences with bigger companies, as well.

Impact for assessees

Most students, teachers and employers involved in the project have been very positive; there was only one completely negative response. One preconception is that students still in middle school are too young for the workplace. Yet from the employer's perspective, there is hardly a big difference between a young worker in basic school and one in vocational school. Or, as one employer puts it, they need to learn the vocation in practice anyway. How well JOPA works for the students depends more on the cooperation between the teachers and the workplace than on the students' ages. One of the obstacles is the traditional idea, so ingrained in schools: that learning occurs in a classroom, with set schedules and groups. JOPA requires that the teacher's role change, that they facilitate the learning process. There is perhaps also some hesitance against cooperation between different educational stages, such as vocational and basic education teachers working together.

Nonetheless, JOPA offers youngsters a way to get experience from the adults' working world, which they often lack otherwise. "I think it's ([important] from the point of view of motivation and development of identity and finding your true self," Viinisalo says.

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