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### *A nation-wide development and research project on integrating work and higher education in Finland*

Marjaana Mäkelä<sup>152</sup>

Integration of work and degree studies is a topical field of development work of Finnish higher education institutions (HEI). In the structure of national education, this sector is divided in two pillars: research-oriented universities and universities of applied sciences.<sup>153</sup> Both sectors encounter the current societal situation where students work long hours weekly, alongside their degree studies. Moreover, an increasing number of students may have extensive work experience already when they start their study cycle in a HEI, and this applies in particular to students entering part-time programs, targeted for professionals with prior vocational qualifications and/or practical experience in the field of study. Additional incentives for the institutions, to establish more functional processes, are found in the forthcoming funding mechanism of higher education in Finland which is to be applied from 2021 onwards. Furthermore, ubiquitous digitalization in educational processes and administration entail increasing and evolving challenges for education providers. On a more specific dimension, the trend to create and implement curricula that are based on competences – rather than enlist courses to be studied – requires efficient validation mechanisms and constant guidance also in the field of work-integrated studies.

In the best of scenarios, higher education studies do not remain in isolation, but despite the challenges of individual time management they can integrate into the other objectives in student life, such as paid work or voluntary and civic work. Mechanisms facilitating this integration developed in Finnish HEI, as they are articulated across actions of a nation-wide project *Toteemi*, are the topic of this article.

#### **Toteemi**

'*Toteemi*' stems from initials of words **T**yöstä **o**ppimassa, **t**yöhön (Learning from and to work). Concerns of enhancing validation processes of work, in order to provide for more flexible study pathways for HE students, have led to a number of projects and dispositions in Finland.

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The author participated in *Toteemi* by facilitating the international benchmarking part of the project and in a subproject that concentrated on designing institutional measures for work-integrated learning.<sup>152</sup> Since the project finished in September 2019, the findings and results presented in this paper unfold the situation prior to the publishing of the final report. The report will be accessible on the website of the project.

Kotila, H. & Vanhanen-Nuutinen, L. (ed.). *Työn ja oppimisen liitto. Työn ja oppimisen uusia innovaatioita*

153 Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (2019). <https://minedu.fi/en/education-system>.

The most extensive of these, *Toteemi*, has been carried out during 2017-2019<sup>154</sup>. It was funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and coordinated by Haaga-Helia UAS. The group of participants consisted of 16 Universities of Applied Sciences, covering hence the majority of this sector nationally, and two research universities.

Figure 1. Project participants



Source: <http://www.amktoteemi.fi/en>.

### Three development areas across the country

Prior studies and projects, such as *Verkkovirta* that concentrated on validation processes at Finnish UAS institutions<sup>155</sup> and the extensive Eurostudent survey<sup>156</sup> have unfolded widely the situation where an increasing number of HE students need to carry out professional, paid activity alongside their entire study cycle. In Finland, cost of living is relatively high, and young people tend to opt for individual housing rather than for staying with their parents. A national feature in Finland is moreover that the fields of study and professional activity have a number of interconnections. The Eurostudent survey revealed that 53 % of Finnish HE students have a full or a part-time job that relates to their field of study.<sup>157</sup> Hence, it is in the interest of all stakeholders to facilitate more efficient validation of all experience accumulated before and during higher education studies, and to establish processes where competences gained at work may become more extensively, if not fully recognized in one's degree. In the framework of higher education, this has been a particularly complicated issue, and approaches to validation of practical experience still remain scarce in this sector. *Toteemi* endeavored to facilitate this complex development, without compromising the quality of higher education.

The project was articulated around three development areas:

- 1) *Flexible at work* where individualized, life-long learning pathways across studies and careers were identified and developed
- 2) *Competence from and to work* aiming at increasing synergy and added value in fields of entrepreneurship, by processes of co-creation and reach-out to alumni networks of HEIs.
- 3) *Well-being in learning at work* that targeted processes of guidance, counselling and tutoring for enhanced validation.

154 [www.amktoteemi.fi/en](http://www.amktoteemi.fi/en).

155 Verkkovirta (2019). <http://www.amkverkkovirta.fi/english>.

156 Hauschildt, K., Gwośc, C., Netz, N. & Mishra, S. (2015). *Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe. EUROSTUDENT V 2012–2015, Synopsis of Indicators*. W. Bertelsmann Verlag GmbH & Co. KG.

157 Eurostudent Thematic Review (2018). <http://www.amktoteemi.fi/sites/amktoteemi/files/TR/paidjobs.pdf>.

Within these development areas, the project sought after answers to three fields of questions. The first field researched how organisations and companies make direct use of their expert's studies in related fields in higher education. Hence, it represented a third-party viewpoint outside the learner and the HEI. The second field addressed the challenges of higher education institutions using students' competences as part of curriculum studies, in order to advance their graduation, constituting thus a viewpoint of the education provider. The third field engaged with the wide and constantly evolving sector of digitalization as an enhancer of ubiquitous and life-long learning. It focused all counterparts, given that digital solutions englobe the operational areas of students, education providers and the workplaces. When successful, this interplay can facilitate learning and cater for solutions both at the workplaces and at the HEIs.

### **Approaches from theory to practice**

Since the Finnish higher education sector is twofold (applied sciences and research) and the needs of both sectors diverge, to some extent, the project included a research-oriented dimension and a more practical developmental dimension. The University of Jyväskylä conducted the section "Flexibly at work", and the mission consisted of compiling an extensive literature review on work-integrated learning for the purpose of Finnish higher education providers. Moreover, the contribution of the University of Jyväskylä – where traditions of pedagogical development are long-established and widely recognized – included creation of a repertoire of best pedagogical practices and solutions of UAS institutions in work-integrated learning. Knowledge and expertise that were formerly somewhat scattered in various institutions and publications have now been archived in a consistent way, in order to better serve needs of future practitioners and researchers.

The University of Helsinki managed the section "Digitalization in contexts of HE pedagogy". Various opportunities provided by digitalization in higher education were observed and analyzed. The ways in which digitalization can enhance learning and furthermore alleviate learning hindrances was a core element of this part of the project. Alongside this approach, expectations for lecturers and staff related to digitalization, in the framework of the project objectives, were studied at the University of Helsinki.

The more practical oriented development dimension, conducted by the sixteen UAS institution partners, consisted of a large array of subprojects with the aim of tool and process development, as well as design of approaches, policies, cooperation strategies, documentation, networking and even IT applications. The leitmotiv for all this development and service design was to create solutions for more functional integration of work and higher education studies, and to enhance validation therein. Regional, institutional and field-specific needs were taken into account, since Finnish UAS institutions have by law also responsibilities of regional development, and their fields of education vary. Moreover, cooperation with companies, organisations and various NGO take diversified forms in different fields of education, such as engineering, business, hospitality or health care.

The main responsibility of Haaga-Helia UAS, coordinating the entire project, was to ensure national follow-up and dissemination of results. Furthermore, Haaga-Helia compiled and analyzed statistical data on HEI students at work, for the needs of *Toteemi* and also of subsequent research. During the two-year length of the project, specialists from the Vocational Teachers' Education unit of Haaga-Helia conducted seminar days across the country, monitored sub-projects and collected hands-on data from various encounters of HEI providers and workplaces. In order to gather actors and contributors from all over the

country and across institutions, altogether five national conference days were organized in the framework of the project. Students' voices were heard in these seminars as well, and dialogue between learners and educators in questions of work-integrated learning consolidated understanding of development needs. Status quo of validation of work in higher education was questioned and solutions were provided by mostly co-creational methods. This generated debate and triggered enhanced processes on institutional, regional and moreover, on national level.

### **UAS institutions concentrating on development and innovation**

The project website ([www.amktoteemi.fi/en](http://www.amktoteemi.fi/en)) was completed at the end of the project. It provides the entire set of findings and results. In the participating UAS institutions, altogether twenty sets of pragmatic toolkits have been created, to meet challenges of integration of work and HE studies. These include various approaches and methods: pilot programmes on intra- and interinstitutional levels, evaluation and follow-up tools, procedures of validation, flexible study modules, methods and repertoires of documentation, as well as online applications to provide more diversified solutions for both students, lecturers and organisations. Agreement templates were created, for increased transparency in work-integrated learning and to enhance information flow between the company, the HEI and the learner.

An example of a sub-project carried out on an institutional level is the process of Demonstration Days at Haaga-Helia UAS. It is the culminating point of work-integrated learning of UAS students who have conducted a period of field-specific learning either in their own work or by volunteering, and this experience has been launched by a tripartite learning agreement between the learner, the lecturer monitoring the process, and the workplace. Demonstration Days are the validation platform where lecturers, peer students and also Haaga-Helia alumni as external evaluators assess and comment the learning results obtained in work-integrated learning or entrepreneurship. This process is described on the website dedicated to disseminating knowledge on work-integrated learning at Haaga-Helia.<sup>158</sup> Work & Study was awarded the second prize in the Global Validation Prize contest 2019, in the category of process development.<sup>159</sup>

Another example of *Toteemi* results is a multi-sectorial study program that is developed in Lahti UAS for event management studies conducted alongside work. *Tapahtumaväylä* (Event Path) is a hop-on type module of 45 ECTS that the student can commence at any time, in function of the responsibilities of his/her work in the event management sector. During the *Toteemi* project and in cooperation between Lahti UAS, workplaces and other *Toteemi* participants, a fine-tuned process was created where students can flexibly integrate event management studies and work, and where project-type learning phases consisting of theoretical and practical studies form a continuum of three 15 ECTS modules. Online guidance is assured with a mobile application in real time, and the modules are named according to learning outcomes targeted: competences are accumulated from *Crew* level towards *Backstage* functions, and eventually lead into *Access all areas*, with extensive knowledge and skills of the field.

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158 [www.workandstudy.fi/en](http://www.workandstudy.fi/en). Also see: Mäkelä, M. & Moisio, A. (2017). Work and Study. Conceptualizing validation of work experience in a Finnish University of Applied Sciences. In: Duvekot, R.C., Coughlan, D. & Aagaard, K. (eds.) *The Learner at the Centre. Validation of Prior Learning strengthens lifelong learning for all*. Houten/Aarhus, European Centre Valuation of Prior Learning/ VIA University College.

159 <https://vplbiennale.org/> & <https://vplbiennale.org/vpl-prize/>

Whilst functional and innovative results have been achieved, a number of development areas have been identified as well. UAS participants of *Toteemi* agree on the necessity to enhance information flows across all counterparts. Moreover, engagement of companies and other organisations is not always perfect, which may result from insufficient understanding of the benefits of qualified students working for them, or in some cases, from unnecessary bureaucracy in institutional operations. HEI and the world of work do not always act as swiftly, and processes as well as time management frames diverge. For the institutions themselves, there is a need to constantly develop curricula that are more efficiently coordinated with qualifications and competences required at work, and not just aiming at accumulating knowledge for the purpose of the degree. Dialogue is still an imperative in this development, and multisectoral, interdisciplinary studies are one way of encountering this challenge.

### **Results from research universities provide background for future work**

At the University of Jyväskylä, research findings of *Toteemi* show that extensive study modules, rather than minor entities, are most functional in integration of work and studies, since they facilitate both motivation and validation as a process. Moreover, results unfold how co-creation methods should be emphasized, when higher education institutions and the world of work collaborate. This cooperation necessitates thorough planning and professional monitoring, in order to yield solid results. Evidence is moreover gathered that project-oriented learning and cross-sectional approaches support most efficiently these processes.

Findings of *Toteemi* have been disseminated in conferences by researchers of the University of Jyväskylä, and outcomes of these can be accessed by the project website ([www.amktoteemi.fi](http://www.amktoteemi.fi)). Theoretical knowledge of the field has been strengthened and articulated by the extensive literature retrieval, conducted by researchers in Jyväskylä. An important development area for UAS lecturers and staff has been identified in this work: corporate cooperation competences of the academia need to be enhanced further, to meet the specific needs of the industries related to areas of education.

University of Helsinki concentrated on the field of digitalization. Whilst conceptualization of the term digitalization in itself was identified as a core objective, pilot studies were conducted with conceptualization of a variety of digital learning and validation approaches. This was organized by using C-map Tools, in collaboration with university lecturers. Moreover, researchers at University of Helsinki concentrated on unfolding of professional competences of students in teacher education programmes that are required in the 21st century. Interplay across learning and digitalization has been analyzed, especially in areas where until recently digital solutions have not had a significant role. Findings have been disseminated in pedagogical journal articles and at seminars, and references will feature in the final report, accessible on the project website. Findings by the University of Helsinki researchers unpack five distinct, yet entwined areas where digitalization affects a teacher's or a lecturer's work. It emerges ...

- as a target for learning and studies.
- as an element in teaching.
- in coordinating work and knowledge.
- in cooperation and interaction.
- as a target of development and research.

These interconnected fields are present in most sectors of today's pedagogical work, and they become even more acute when co-creational strategies of development with companies

are joint to traditional teaching occupation. Competence challenges for teachers continue to grow, which necessitates constant follow-up and monitoring at the education providers' end. This will benefit well-being at work for both teachers and learners.

### **Haaga-Helia UAS**

The project team at Haaga-Helia UAS collected extensive statistical data on students at work on national and international scales. Publications on these findings have been and will be disseminated nationally. Moreover, coordination of findings and results of all partners enables further development in the fields of action of the project: integration of work and HE studies, well-being of students at work and in studies, situational and contextual variation in well-being (among young and mature students), and finally, experiences of UAS graduates on competences required at work.

Findings on an institutional level at Haaga-Helia UAS, resulting from the sub-project work, indicate that processes of career guidance need to be more efficiently integrated to validation of work experience in UAS studies, and training of both career counselors and Work & Study practitioners needs more thorough coordination. It is not always explicit to students how, when and with whom they are able to carry out work-integrated learning, and what this process entails for the learner and the company or organisation. Guidance processes are to be developed with approaches emulated from service design.

### **Observations embracing the Berlin Declaration**

*Toteemi* raised a number of topics to national debates in Finnish higher education and enabled long-term development work where cooperation networks have been consolidated and innovative approaches have been found, to facilitate work-integrated learning. Yet, in a wider context, validation in HE studies including recognition of prior higher education studies, validation of non- and informal learning as well as integration of work and degree studies needs to be redesigned, for more flexible pathways in studies. The necessity to increase the flexibility dimension is a current topic in European and global debates on higher education.<sup>160</sup> Flexibility may appear with diverging aspects for learners, companies and higher education institutions. Nevertheless, it is an objective that merits thorough discussion and constant development.

Experiences gathered throughout *Toteemi* and other findings align perfectly with the recommendations of the Berlin Declaration. Foremost, recommendations of the Article 1 on organisational arrangements for validation correspond to *Toteemi* outcomes; clearly defined roles of all counterparts and their efficient communication is a key component also in efficient work-integrated learning in higher education studies. Moreover, there is a lot to be accomplished still, to obtain functional guidance and counseling processes where students, lecturers, counselors and industry representatives all are aware of the process, which itself has specified objectives. Hence, recommendations of Article 4 on support structures are embraced also by the Finnish higher education sectors.

To conclude, it is appropriate to quote the Article 3.4 of the Declaration that could be cited as well in the final outcomes of *Toteemi*: *“Validation pathways need to be modular, transparent, and comprehensible at all stages of the process, in order to allow for flexible work and education pathways.”*

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160 The New Student (2018). The New Student - Flexible Learning Paths and Future Learning Environments. Conference on higher education of the Austrian presidency of the European Union. Vienna, 2018. <https://www.eu2018.at/calendar-events/political-events/thenewstudent.html>.