

Analysis of support systems in vocational education institutions: main results and recommendations

The aim of this analysis is to map the provision and organisation of support services in Estonian vocational education institutions (33) and to assess the effectiveness of these support services in the study process as a measure to reduce drop-out rates. For this, a systematic literature review and document analysis were carried out as well as an online survey among the leaders, teachers and support specialists in vocational education institutions. The literature overview concentrated on support services and measures that are found to influence reducing drop-out rates in vocational education and training. The document analysis focussed on mapping different aspects of the provision and organisation of support services in vocational education institutions. The aim of the online survey was to get an overview of overall satisfaction with support systems (in reducing drop-out rates) as well as gather best practices of providing effective support measures in vocational education institutions. 354 workers from 28 institutions participated in the survey. Following is the overview of the main results of the analysis as well as policy recommendations made to the vocational education institutions as well as to policy makers.

SUPPORT SERVICES – PROVISION AND ORGANISATION

In Estonian vocational education institutions, the approach to the provision and organisation of support services varies to a significant degree. While there are institutions that have designed comprehensive support service systems that are systematically managed, there are also schools that have chosen an individual approach, i.e. services are offered when circumstances arise. **This study shows that the statistical data on the existence of support service specialists in vocational education institutions, based on the data available through the Estonian Education Information System (Eesti Hariduse Infosüsteem, EHIS), does not adequately reflect the actual situation in schools regarding whether and how provision of support services is ensured to their students.** The findings of this study indicate that vocational training institutions employ more social pedagogues as well as career counsellors and learning assistance specialists than official records indicate. **The support systems in vocational education institutions usually comprise of various services and activities that are aimed at supporting students in their learning, i.e. including a wider range of services and activities than stipulated by law.** Commonly, the provision of support services is often carried out by different professionals within the schools, with group supervisors as well as teachers in the central role. In addition, the support network often also includes school boarding-house staff, head of extracurricular activities, librarians, nurses, student buddies, etc., but these people are not reflected in official statistics, at least not as part of the support system. According to the findings of this study, there are 20 vocational education institutions that employ support specialists.

Based on the findings of this study, the approaches employed by Estonian vocational education institutions regarding the provision and management of support services can be divided into following four main types:

- **First, support services are provided by teachers:** There are no support specialists in staff and usually the school documents indicate that teachers (usually in the role of course supervisors) shall offer support to students if problems arise. Often these documents also make note that support services are offered upon agreement with the principal (which may mean a long chain of information, depending on the school size). Upon necessity, external partners (e.g. local branch of national career counselling network Rajaleidja or other service providers) are used for the provision of support services. This approach has been adopted by approximately a quarter of vocational education institutions.
- **Second, support services are provided by designated support persons** (usually various staff members) This model differs from the previous one by the fact that the pool of support persons includes, in addition to teachers and group supervisors, also school boarding-house staff, head of extracurricular activities, school nurses, librarians, youth organisers, etc. In addition, external partners may also be engaged in the provision of support services (e.g. Rajaleidja network or other service providers). This approach has been taken by four vocational education institutions.
- **Third, the school has hired support specialists for the purposes of providing support services.** These institutions have, in addition to group supervisors and teachers, also hired social pedagogues or psychologists. Often, one person fulfils the roles of several support specialists. Some schools have opted not to employ different types of specialists because they are not deemed necessary (usually by the management), in other cases, schools don't have the necessary resources; although there is need to have a specialist on staff. In addition to support specialists, the school support system also grants an important role to group supervisors, teachers and other designated support persons. Approximately a third of vocational education institutions have opted for this approach.
- **Fourth, support services are provided by a team of different support service specialists and schools have also set up a special support unit.** Such schools boast much more comprehensive and well-thought-out support systems; their personnel include various support service specialists that make up a team where everyone has clearly outlined roles and responsibilities. Often such schools have additionally set up separate specialised units (e.g. counselling centre, support service department, support service unit, etc.) that provide a variety of support services. This approach is taken by approximately a third of vocational education institutions.

The four models outlined above do not manifest in the same manner across all vocational education institutions, which is mainly because there is great variation across schools as to the types of support systems and there are very diverse of interpretations of what constitutes a support service. The law prescribes that vocational education institutions must ensure access to various support services and these services (offered either by school staff or other service providers) are available upon necessity as stipulated in official documents and also corroborated by staff interviews. Further research needs to be conducted as to what extent different support services are actually accessible to students and how schools understand or measure this accessibility. In addition, with regard to the above-mentioned models, it is important to bear in mind and continue analysing the maintenance of quality standards because in many cases the provision of support services falls on those employees who do not actually have the necessary qualifications. It is understandable that people who have been appointed as support

service specialists are motivated to do their best to support their students, but in order to ensure the quality and effectiveness of support services, it is important to ensure that support specialists have undergone relevant professional training.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS – STRENGTHS and CHALLENGES

Most of surveyed school management representatives, teachers and other specialists engaged in the provision of support services rate their institution's support systems on the positive side. Most commonly, the respondents highlighted that teachers are good at detecting when students are in danger of dropping out (73% agree), that the support system is based on early detection of problems (65% agree), and that the main feature of the support system is collaboration among different parties (62% agree). On the other hand, there were also some critical notes. For example, 41% of respondents indicated that their institution's support system is not very supportive of teachers in their daily work and 33% do not agree with the statement that teachers are aware of the opportunities offered by the support system and know how to use them. 37% found that their school's support system is not comprehensive and 31% thought that the system was not managed well.

Staff members (e.g. management, teachers and people engaged in the provision of support services) feel that the most important factors are the readiness of students to turn to support service specialists for help and the readiness and awareness on the part of teachers to reach out to support service specialists and team up with them. Actually, readiness to use support services, both among students and teachers, is considered to be one of the most critical factors for the successful implementation of support systems, while the lack thereof is deemed the most hindering factor. In addition, it is also important to ensure that the overall organisation of studies is set up to actively engage support service specialists, taking into account the size of study groups and the management's encouraging attitude towards using the help offered by support service specialists. Respondents indicated that the **most serious hindrance to the provision of support services is the small number of support service specialists as compared to the number of students and insufficient resources for hiring support service specialists.**

What is more, the results of this study indicate that **very often support services are not managed comprehensively and systematically**, which manifests mainly in the following challenges:

- **The personnel are not sufficiently aware of the support services available at their school.** The survey, conducted among teachers, support service specialists and the management, indicated that people working at the same school often have very different knowledge about whether and what kinds of support services are offered at their school. For example, while the management assures that services are available, teachers often indicate that these services are not actually offered. On the other hand, there are also contrary situations where teachers claim that services are available, but the management does not agree. Approximately a third of respondents indicated that teachers are mostly not aware of the possibilities offered by the support system. 10% of surveyed teachers were unable to evaluate the support services system at their schools. In all institutions teachers are considered to have an instrumental role in noticing their students' needs, and therefore teachers' awareness of possibilities offered by the support system is of critical importance. Awareness-raising among the school staff and more efficient internal communication is undoubtedly an important responsibility of the management. In addition, the study showed that sometimes even the

management has very different levels of knowledge of available support services at their school. What is more, the management seems to think that teachers' awareness of the possibilities offered by the support system is much higher than teachers' own assessment of their level of awareness.

- **The information about support services is dispersed among different documents and is often contradictory; the information needed by students and their families is usually not available on the institution's web page.** In general, the documents (e.g. study regulations, development strategies and other available documents) and web pages of vocational education institutions contain little information about the support system and services and/or there are differences between the contents of the official documents and the information published on the web pages. In some cases, the relevant documents were difficult to find and only a few schools had web pages offering a comprehensive overview of support services and available measures that are offered to students (and also to their parents) at the school or giving guidance on whom to contact in case of problems. Therefore, it is difficult to understand which sources give an adequate overview of the actual situation regarding the provision of support services at a given school.
- **Although the school may have a strategy for dropout reduction, the personnel are often unaware of it.** The study found that in most cases, the strategies for dropout reduction are part of the school's general strategy; however, content analysis of documents indicated that although general development strategies often mention dropping out and/or support services, its nature and scope varies to a significant degree. In some cases it is quite detailed, but in most cases it is rather brief and cursory. Therefore, it is difficult to evaluate whether the strategies are comprehensively well-thought-out. In several cases, the development strategies describe completely different scenarios compared to the systems outlined in study regulations.

THE ROLE OF SUPPORT SYSTEMS IN DROPOUT PREVENTION and REDUCTION

All support services that are stipulated by law (i.e. career counselling, learning assistance, special needs and social educational and psychological services) were deemed as effective means in addressing dropout reduction in vocational training. In this context, special needs educational services were deemed most effective (by 90% of respondents), while psychological services were seen as least effective (71% found them effective). However, it is important to bear in mind that special needs educational services are not offered in many vocational education institutions and information regarding people receiving psychological help is usually not public, which means that it may be difficult for teachers to assess the effectiveness of those services. Compared to representatives of other professions surveyed in the framework of this study, teachers appeared to be most sceptical with regard to the effectiveness of support services. Since the study also indicated that teachers have poor awareness levels about available support services, it might serve as an explanation for more negative assessment of those services.

In addition to the five above-mentioned support services, **the respondents rated group supervisor (group or class head teacher) systems as being very effective.** Group supervisor is a person who takes note of problematic students, counsels them, gets in touch with the student's family, helps them with unfinished assignments, engages other support service specialists or teachers and remains part of the team dealing with that particular student. Since the results of this survey indicated that students' poor study motivation is believed to be the most pressing problem that must be addressed in first order when dealing with students that are on the verge of dropping out, the engagement of group supervisors may

be a good means to support the maintenance and increase of study motivation because students are offered more individual attention. Most vocational schools actually have a system of group supervisors and they are often mentioned in official school documents as providers of an instrumental support service; however, this study did not reach a clear understanding about the actual scope of implementation of this approach. Other important support measures or principles that were deemed effective for dropout reduction were **individual approach to students; systematic activities and collaboration, active and quick communication and responsiveness; working with the parents/family; early detection of warning signs of dropping out; supporting students in finding the right specialty, and cooperation with the local municipality.**

In vocational education, the reasons for dropping out are extremely varied and usually it is a combination of several factors. Based on the findings of this study, **vocational education institutions that want to prevent and reduce dropout rates must first and foremost address low study motivation, learning difficulties and failure, insufficient general skills and minimal family support.** According to literature and international best practice, these are the kinds of dropout-related reasons that can be effectively addressed with support services and in vocational training preventive measures are paramount. **Studies characterise effective preventive measures as follows:**

- taking an interest in students, understanding their concerns and offering individual counselling to support the development of positive self-image;
- analysis of study activities to ensure balance between theory and practice, in order to ensure that students understand the need for theoretical study;
- raising awareness among teachers about early detection of warning signs of dropout and their role in this process;
- school's commitment to implementing preventive measures;
- involving parents in the student's vocational choices.

Based on the mapping of support services that was carried out in the framework of this study, we can conclude that **vocational education institutions engage in above-mentioned activities in one way or another, but there were only a few cases where the approach was comprehensive and students were offered diverse support services.**

The main results and conclusions of this study form the basis for the recommendations that have been drawn up for vocational education institutions and for the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research for the purposes of developing support service systems and improve dropout reduction measures in vocational training. These recommendations focus primarily on supporting the development of a systematic and comprehensive support system and its effective management in vocational education institutions.

Recommendations for vocational education institutions for the development of support services and dropout reduction:

- Systematically monitor and analyse students' problems and needs and the school's capacity and challenges in ensuring support services; based on these inputs develop **a comprehensive strategy for support services** that would constitute an integral part of the school's overall development strategy. This strategy must be clearly aimed at solving problems that have arisen at this particular school, it must have a clear objective, clearly defined outcomes and well-thought-out and applicable

measures. The strategy must outline clearly what kinds of services are included in the school's support system and how it supports students (as well as teachers). In addition, the strategy should outline clear tasks and responsibilities for all concerned parties, as well as cooperation in the process of providing support services. Moreover, the strategy must be comprehensive, well lead and managed and effectively communicated to the whole staff, students and their parents. Finally, the implementation of this strategy must be regularly monitored and it should be amended when necessary. What is more, the schools must ensure that the strategy is in accordance with all other relevant school documents (e.g. study regulation, development strategy, information published on the web page).

- The strategy should primarily focus on **supporting students' development by offering all-around support through support services**. The reasons behind dropping out are very diverse, intertwined and several of these cannot be addressed by vocational education institutions themselves (e.g. issues related to family or friends), and therefore, addressing and eliminating individual reasons may not yield desired results. **The efforts should concentrate on preventing problems, primarily through support in choosing the most suitable and appropriate study programme**. This could take the form of comprehensive support for first-year students, systematic career training, provision of top quality support services, support for developing individual autonomy, learning readiness, motivation and coping mechanisms; as well as creating a safe and motivating atmosphere in school.
- Ensure that the personnel, especially the **teachers, are aware of the school's support services system** and other measures that are available for supporting students. This could be achieved by improved internal communication and teacher training, particularly on the topics of early problem detection and dropout reduction. In addition to awareness-raising, the schools must ensure that the entire personnel have a common understanding about the nature of support services.
- Facilitate and **increase cooperation between staff** in the provision of support services. To that end, it is critical to establish close cooperation and effective communication, both between the management and support service specialists, as well as the teachers and support service specialists. Additionally, support service specialists should be invited to participate in team building exercises. The schools should develop a working environment that values all staff members and is based on collaborative community spirit, which will in turn lead to a stronger support network and safer school atmosphere for the students.
- In order to prevent students in vocational training from experiencing learning difficulties and loss of study motivation, **their career awareness should be increased in collaboration with basic schools**, as well as with career counselling centres (e.g. Rajaleidja), **already before they enter vocational training**. This means active promotion of training programmes, taking part in hobby groups, and if possible, individual meetings with prospective students (and their parents), as well as awareness-raising in basic schools. In addition, schools should offer **continuous and systematic career development throughout vocational training**, alignment of study programmes with labour market realities after graduation and increase individual awareness of one's career choices. At the school level, it is important to develop an understanding of the critical role played by career training and planning in supporting students' individual development (thereby also reducing the dropout rate).

- **Examine best practices adopted at other vocational education institutions** in setting up their support system and addressing dropout reduction and adopting suitable practices at own school. For example, this study highlights the group supervisor system, student buddy systems, mapping the backgrounds and situation of first-year students, development interviews with students etc. In addition, this study includes an annex that outlines the types of support systems at vocational education institutions in Estonia and provides a more comprehensive overview of accumulated experiences and best practices at different schools.

Recommendations for the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research for supporting vocational education institutions in developing their support systems and providing support services:

- Facilitate and **support vocational education institutions in developing strategies for support services (incl. dropout reduction) as well as their effective management and implementation.** Offer relevant training, prepare necessary guidelines, evaluate and reward effective strategies in the process of deciding performance-based funding or accreditation. The Ministry plays an instrumental role in offering leadership and encouraging school management to develop well-thought-out and comprehensive support systems.
- **Acknowledge the central role played by group supervisors in the support system** and support schools by ensuring full-time work and a fair salary for group supervisors. Offer support to vocational education institutions that do not have a group supervisor system or where the existing system is not operating properly. **Collect information about group supervisors in the Estonian Education Information System; seriously consider regularly gathering information on other professionals offering critical support services as well.**
- **Analyse the central role played by local branches of the national career counselling network Rajaleidja and actual access to their services, as well as their effectiveness in supporting students in vocational training and especially in terms of dropout reduction.** The provision of support services by external actors may give rise to situations where schools lose interest in maintaining support systems and approaching dropout reduction in a comprehensive manner because it is easier to parlay the responsibility to the local Rajaleidja centre. On the other hand, based on the findings of this study, the services offered by Rajaleidja centres are not always sufficiently accessible and actually these centres do not even provide services to a significant part of the target group, i.e. adults in vocational training. In addition, school personnel (especially the teachers) are not particularly well-informed about the services offered by Rajaleidja centres or that these services might be available to their school.
- Since insufficient funding remains one of the main hindrances to the provision of support services, the Ministry of Education and Research should continue working on **allocating sufficient funding to schools so they would be able to offer students support services** and also hire support service specialists. This funding could be tied to requirements for the schools to develop and implement support services strategies.
- In the process of supporting students and aiming for dropout reduction, **the primary focus should shift more towards developing preventive measures, funding, and implementation.** Vocational education institutions must be supported and guided to shift their focus more on preventive

- measures, while also paying attention to students' situation before they enter vocational training. To that end, we must ensure that all students who reach basic education have relevant competencies (incl. general skills) and good awareness of career opportunities to prevent and mitigate risks of experiencing learning difficulties and dropping out of vocational training. Vocational education institutions must be supported in offering systematic career training to all students.