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Collaboration Between Education and Work in Finland: Vocational Education and Training Actors From Supporting Students' Learning to Serving Companies?

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Abstract

Purpose: Upper secondary vocational education and training (VET) in Finland is largely work-based, with increasing collaboration between VET institutions and workplaces. There is a need for an updated and comprehensive understanding of this collaboration. Therefore, this study investigates how workplace representatives discuss collaboration between Finnish VET actors (i.e., VET institutions and teachers) and workplaces.

Methods: Interviews with workplace representatives were analysed using the principles of discourse analysis. The data were examined to reveal how they talked about the forms and activities of collaboration between education and work. From the talk, the positions of the VET actors and the workplace actors were identified on a time continuum: Current positions and desired future positions.

Findings: Four discourses on collaboration were identified: (i) Organising work-based learning, (ii) ensuring a skilled workforce, (iii) supporting the development of workplaces, and (iv) promoting the vitality of vocational sectors. The current positions given to VET actors varied from supporters of student learning and organisers of education to company-oriented trainer of staff competences. In the future, VET actors are expected to play an emerging role as business consultants and innovators, and promoters of the

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attractiveness of vocational sectors and education. In addition to the traditional positions, the findings were thus characterised by the positions of VET actors at the service of companies.

Conclusions: Theoretically, the study suggests that there is a need for a multi-level and multi-faceted model of collaboration in VET that covers individual and institutional (including both VET institutions and workplaces) as well as sectoral and regional perspectives, as they can all manifest simultaneously in collaboration. From a practical perspective, the study highlights the organisation, management and resourcing of teachers' work to enable them to work with companies in a way that is not based solely on service, but on sustainable and meaningful collaboration for them, the students and the companies. Collaboration should not only be based on individual teachers and their networks, but the organisational culture should support multi-faceted, mutual, and long-term partnerships. Vocational teacher education and teachers' working conditions need to support the continuous development of teachers' comprehensive competences and lay the foundations for a broad identity orientation as opposed to a narrow teacher identity position. The development of teachers' competences, not just pedagogical competence, should be a strong strategic goal and function in VET institutions.

Keywords: Vocational Education and Training, VET, Cooperation, Vocational Teachers, Qualitative Research

1 Introduction

Providing relevant and high-quality vocational education and training (VET) often relies on collaboration between VET institutions and workplaces (e.g., Brockmann & Smith, 2023; Gessler, 2017; Hiim, 2023; Sappa & Aprea, 2014; Schaap et al., 2012). The recent Herning Declaration (2025) follows the line of previous policy recommendations, emphasising the importance of strong partnerships in fostering modern, inclusive, and excellent VET, while also recognising the crucial role of companies in work-based learning. At the institutional level, collaboration often focuses on updating vocational curricula, promoting vocational knowledge and organising work-based learning (Bouw et al., 2021; Sauli et al., 2021; Wesselink et al., 2010). However, collaboration between workplaces and VET institutions is not limited to promoting learning but can also contribute to other goals. It seems that the 'mission' of VET institutions to provide a skilled workforce remains, but the focus on regional development also emphasises new missions, such as problem-solving, supporting the adoption of new technologies at workplaces and participating in research and innovation projects (Olazaran et al., 2018). Similarly, it has been described how educational 'tools' are being complemented by socio-economic,

innovative and technological tools, such as anticipating skills needs or offering targeted specialist training for specific companies as well as establishing joint research activities (Terentyeva et al., 2018).

These new perspectives on VET require an examination of the issues that guide collaboration between education and work and an understanding of the expectations of the various stakeholders. Previous theoretical models related to collaboration between learning venues or experiences have been especially rooted in learning and pedagogy without clear considerations about the role of teachers (Akkerman & Bakker, 2012; Guile & Griffiths, 2001; Schwendimann et al., 2015; Tynjälä et al., 2020), but due to the changing VET landscape, there is a need to create an up-to-date picture of collaboration. To contribute to current research and existing theoretical models, this study examines the collaboration between vocational upper secondary institutions and workplaces through the discursive lens of interviews with Finnish workplace representatives. We use collaboration as the broader term, which may relate to different types of cooperative and collaborative activities at different levels (see also Gessler, 2017).

As a background to this study, the following sections outline previous theoretical considerations and research findings on collaboration, considering the perspectives of different stakeholders. Our empirical investigation takes place in the context of Finnish VET that is competence-based. The competences defined in the national qualification requirements can be acquired either in school-based, work-based or virtual environments and studies and their duration can be tailored to match the individual needs of the students (Ministry of Education and Culture & Finnish National Agency of Education, 2023).

VET is increasingly taking place at workplaces and there is no minimum or maximum time set for work-based learning that can be carried out either as apprenticeship training or via a training agreement. Apprenticeship training includes the student being a full-time worker and receiving pay, whereas a training agreement is linked to unpaid training with a student status. Although the VET institution is responsible for the training taking place at the workplace during the workplace training periods, a workplace trainer is nominated, and the workplace should keep track of the student's progress and keep the VET institution up to date. To support this, VET institutions and teachers are more engaged in collaboration with companies (see e.g., Kolho et al., 2023; Lehtonen et al., 2018) and work-life oriented learning is widely considered in various learning environments (see e.g., Kiikeri et al., 2023).

This study makes two major contributions: The main theoretical contribution of this study is to advocate an expanded theoretical model of collaboration between vocational education and work. The practical implications for professional teacher education and VET institutions include perspectives on supporting teachers as key actors in this kind of collaboration.

1.1 Theoretical Considerations on Collaboration Between Education and Work

Collaboration between education and work has been theoretically discussed and modelled especially from sociocultural perspectives and the perspective of pedagogy and learning. The Integrative Pedagogy model (e.g., Tynjälä et al., 2020) highlights the elements of expert knowledge, including personal conceptual knowledge, practical knowledge and regulative knowledge as well as sociocultural knowledge embedded in practices. These elements are integrated in high-level competence, which is why educational practices should aim to promote the integration of various types of knowledge, for instance, through practical problem solving and authentic workplace experiences (Tynjälä et al., 2020). Similarly, the need to integrate work experiences in VET is visible in the connective model of work experience (Guile & Griffiths, 2001). Initially, the model highlighted concrete transitions between different learning settings, but more recently the need for continuous recontextualisation of knowledge and practices in various contexts throughout the life-course and professional development has been highlighted (Guile, 2020).

Furthermore, the concept of boundary crossing has been used to draw attention to processes that are involved in integrating different types of knowledge that are learnt and developed in different contexts (Akkerman & Bakker, 2012). In VET, the distinct practices of institutions and workplaces can lead to discontinuities, boundaries that can potentially promote learning and identity development, new understandings, change of practices and even institutional development, for example, through coordination and establishing cooperative and routinised exchanges between practices (Akkerman & Bakker, 2012). The gap between these distinct practices can also be bridged by educational technologies. The *Erfahrungsraum* model (Schwendimann et al., 2015) considers technology-enhanced boundary crossing spaces that promote conversations between education and work contexts and facilitate the role of reflection in learning from experiences and in integrating these experiences into relevant knowledge.

Recently, the traditional teaching- and learning-focused relationship between VET institutions and workplaces has been broken by considering VET to be a service through the lens of service-dominant logic (see Cai & Kosaka, 2024; Vargo & Lusch, 2016). It has been argued that VET appears as a value co-creation system, where institutions and workplaces collaborate to produce and deliver high-quality services (Cai & Kosaka, 2024). Following the premises of service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2016), students and companies are service beneficiaries who determine the value of VET uniquely and contextually (Cai & Kosaka, 2024). However, it has also been noted that there is a need to move from provider-client perspectives towards strategic partnerships between VET institutions and workplaces (Lavía et al., 2024).

Collaboration has also been approached from the perspective of various types of ecosystems, including business, innovation and digital learning ecosystems (Virolainen et al., 2022). In addition, the skill ecosystems approach has also been emphasised in VET to foster the understanding of the importance of the regional or sectoral context in which skills are developed and used (Buchanan et al., 2017). In skill ecosystems, education providers, employers, industry representatives and other stakeholders are brought together to establish regional networks and partnerships that are not government-led but instead supported by policy context, frameworks and resources (Hall & Lansbury, 2006). The emerging Social Ecosystem Model (Spours, 2019) has further highlighted the need to acknowledge disruptive economic and technological developments and support for sustainable living, making VET a means to promote inclusive economic growth and to transform local environments. In practice, the model highlights place-based networks and partnerships between various stakeholders and suggests that education providers could work as local anchor institutions that have a recognised role in contributing to local development (Spours, 2019).

1.2 Empirical Considerations on Building Collaboration and Partnerships

Building partnerships between different stakeholders in networks has proved to be difficult and time-consuming (Buchanan et al., 2017). To promote collaboration, it should be acknowledged that stakeholder groups can have varying expectations about responsibilities (Wesselink et al., 2010). Therefore, in addition to promoting informal contacts and interactions at the interpersonal level (Bouw et al., 2021; Sauli et al., 2021), formal agreements and measures have been established to clarify responsibilities, ensure follow-up discussions and create predictability at the institutional level (Hiim, 2023). However, formal requirements or specifications alone are insufficient as often long-established partnerships and shared understandings are needed (Brockmann & Smith, 2023). In practice, it seems that stakeholder groups may possess different conceptions, for example, of learning (Wesselink et al., 2010), although shared understandings between vocational teachers, trainers and students about the purpose and tasks of the vocation are essential to holistic vocational education (Hiim, 2023).

With regard to building partnerships and skills systems, there is a recognised need to focus on creating and maintaining leadership (Wedekind et al., 2021) as well as to acknowledge the VET teachers' and trainers' important role in facilitating and maintaining these contributions when they act as mediators between education and work (Ramsarup et al., 2023). Their pivotal role in facilitating collaboration between education and work and in promoting and integrating learning across contexts is widely acknowledged in previous research, although collaboration in practice may be hindered by a lack of political interest and support (Gessler, 2017) and teachers' insecurity and lack of vocational and pedagogical

knowledge and resources (Bouw et al., 2021; Hiim, 2023; Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020; Sappa & Aprea, 2014; Sauli et al., 2021). Often collaboration may be challenging for teachers, since they need to balance between the needs of the learner and the workplace (Lehtonen et al., 2018). In addition, teachers' collaboration with workplaces is not necessarily well supported and systematically guided by their VET institutions (e.g., Vähäsantanen et al., 2009).

Thus, previous research has emphasised the importance of teacher autonomy and agency in facilitating connections between education and work (Kolho et al., 2023; Ramsarup et al., 2023; Sappa et al., 2016). Teachers' collaborative activities are often driven by their own professional identity and competences, and not all teachers have relevant competences and desire for active collaboration (e.g., Vähäsantanen et al., 2009). Overall, there is a need for a more strategic, proactive approach to collaboration instead of reactive collaboration related to challenges and issues (Schwede et al., 2025).

For workplaces, collaboration often supports the possibility of selecting and recruiting qualified skilled workers suited to their needs (Hiim, 2023; Lavía et al., 2024). In addition, the benefits of collaboration for workplaces relate to better recruitment processes, improved opportunities for employees' continuous learning as well as access to teachers, facilities, projects, technical services, etc. (Olazaran et al., 2018). However, workplaces may also be interested in collaborating with VET institutions by social motives that highlight social responsibility and contribute to training systems (Lavía et al., 2024). From a service perspective, effective collaboration should be grounded in mutual interests, proximity and trust that create mutual satisfaction (Lavía et al., 2024). Thus, it becomes important for VET institutions to understand the expectations, problems and the needs of the workplaces to become proper strategic partners in value creation (Lavía et al., 2024). In sum, shared goals, partner relations and communication, trust and trustworthiness, as well as the capacity for partnership work and leadership in building and maintaining partnerships over time, are important (see also Billett et al., 2007; Vogelsang et al., 2021).

This study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the collaboration between VET actors (i.e., vocational institutions and teachers) and workplaces in Finland. The research question is: How do workplace representatives discuss the collaboration between education and work?

2 Methods

In this study, we adopt a discursive approach (Hökkä et al., 2010; Nikander, 2012; Wetherell, 2007) as our theoretical starting point to gain a deeper understanding of the collaboration between VET and workplaces in Finland. Our premise is that language does not transparently represent the world, nor do discourses produced in research describe an objective 'reality'

(see Hökkä et al., 2010; Wetherell, 2007). We apply a discursive approach because we regard interviews primarily as a means of producing accounts rather than merely reporting on collaboration between VET and workplaces (Nikander, 2012).

As described above, there is a rich scholarly discussion on VET, in which multiple discourses exist, defining the context, tasks, and roles of collaboration in different ways. Applying discourse analysis in our study allows us to empirically identify the diversity of discourses about collaboration between VET and workplaces, including their emphases, tasks and role constructions (e.g., Hökkä et al., 2010), from the perspective of workplace representatives. Previous research has also emphasised the force of discursive analysis in exploring interaction and collaboration in education (Nikander & Vehviläinen, 2010; Sjölund, 2023). In our analysis, we draw on critical discourse analysis, as we do not view language and discourse practices as an innocent, transparent, or neutral means of description (Nikander & Vehviläinen, 2010). Power relations are also present in the interview talk, as workplace actors position VET actors. Engaging in critical discourse analysis makes these dynamics visible for readers.

2.1 Participants and Interviews

In this study, we utilised interviews as a method of data collection because we understand them as a discursive space, where it is possible to flexibly produce in-depth, comprehensive, and multifaceted accounts, encompassing experiences, meanings, and perspectives on the topic under investigation (Nikander, 2012). This study used 24 interviews with workplace representatives. One interview was conducted with three participants, while the others were individual interviews. The participants (seven male, 19 female) worked in companies that varied in size from small to medium and large, and represented different fields (e.g., the food industry, the construction industry, trade, security services, and social and health care services). The participants' companies were in specific fields, but many participants had experiences and views about collaboration between education and work in other fields in their current or previous companies. Due to the number of participants, this study did not focus on sectoral comparisons or comparisons between companies of different sizes but aimed to provide an overview of collaboration between VET actors and workplaces. The interviewees' work roles in their respective companies also varied, comprehensively covering the companies' HR managers, general manager, finance manager, director of production and logistics, recruiter, and company owner.

All interviews were carried out online from 2021–2023, each interview was conducted by one interviewer. The common feature of all the interviews was that they focused on collaboration between vocational education and work. The interviews were semi-structured, covering different topics related to the collaboration such as the forms and nature of the collaboration, the role and activities of the VET institution, the teacher and the companies

in the collaboration, and wishes and suggestions for the development of the collaboration. Questions were asked around these themes during the interviews. The questions were pre-formulated, but they were presented and formulated in such a way as to relate smoothly to the interviewee's narration. If necessary, further questions were asked based on the interviewee's answers. Thus, the interviews were aimed at building an open conversation while at the same time focusing on pre-determined topics, without having strictly formulated questions in a specific order (e.g., Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Altogether, the interviews lasted 937 minutes, 39 minutes on average.

The interviewees talked in a multifaceted manner about the interview themes. They discussed the current state of collaboration between vocational education and working life, both in positive and critical terms, while also reflecting on previous experiences and arguing based on these experiences and relating the situation to the past. They also actively expressed their ideas and views on how collaboration and vocational education could be developed in the future. They also emphasised that they wanted to highlight certain perspectives on vocational education in order to bring about change. In this way, it can be said that the interviewees used the interview discourse not only for describing, but also for reflecting, arguing, justifying, persuading, and influencing. Interviews are a specific discursive space, and the interviewer's participation is a crucial part of the data (Nikander, 2012). In this study, the interviewers were experts in VET, and based on this knowledge, they asked clarifying and follow-up questions. Thus, we understand the interview data as discursive data, which is by no means a pure, neutral or real picture of real and actual collaboration, but rather co-constructed in interaction. It is shaped both by the themes and questions introduced by the interviewer and by the interviewees' interests and agendas (Nikander, 2012).

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles, including the voluntary participation of the participants, who had an opportunity to withdraw from the study, and the comprehensive information about the study provided to the interviewees before the interviews. Ethical considerations were addressed through the implementation of data storage protocols, the conduct of anonymous data analysis, and the presentation of participants and findings in an anonymised manner.

2.2 Analysis of the Interview Data

To analyse the interviews, we applied the principles of discourse analysis (Edwards, 2005; Nikander & Vehviläinen, 2010), notably critical discursive psychology (Wetherell, 2007; see also Hökkä et al., 2010). A discursive approach focuses on how language is used to produce meanings and define a shared social reality. Discourses reflect and guide people's behaviour, actions and interactions, which in turn maintain or reproduce social realities and practices (Hökkä et al., 2010; Sjölund, 2023). Therefore, they cannot be seen as a description of reality.

Our analytical focus was not on linguistic issues but rather on language in use (Sjölund, 2023), i.e., how collaboration was discussed, including its meanings and forms, and how the positions of different actors (including the VET institution, the teacher and the company) were described in collaboration. The analysis was conducted on a cross-case basis, meaning that patterns in the data were searched for both within and across interviews.

After transcribing and familiarising us with the interviews, we first identified extracts from the interviews with representatives of companies about collaboration between education and work. As the ways of talking seemed to differ from each other, we decided to group the extracts into four different categories based on their content in terms of the main focus and target of collaboration. We named these collaboration categories based on their contents and calculated how many interviewees mentioned them. Afterwards, we proceeded to examine the function and context of talk for each discourse. The concept of function refers to a purpose and intention in the talk. To understand the function of the talk, there is always a need to consider the talk within a particular time and space, that is, in its context (Wetherell, 2007; see also Hökkä et al., 2010). In addition, we identified the positions that workplace representatives offer to VET institutions, teachers, and themselves in collaboration. Positions are seen as discursive spaces produced in a given discourse-centred situation and dynamic and evolving clusters of demands, responsibilities commitments, hopes and expectations (Green et al., 2020; Nikander & Vehviläinen, 2010; Sjölund, 2023). Since the workplace representatives discussed collaboration and described the positions through different time perspectives, we identified and defined the positions on a temporal continuum: The current positions and the desired future positions. In the findings section, the nine interview extracts presented were drawn from eight interviews.

3 Collaboration Between VET Actors and Workplaces

The main findings are summarised in Table 1, followed by a description of each discourse of collaboration. First, we briefly describe the context and function of the discourse, and then we describe how the workplace representatives discussed current and future collaboration through the lens of the different positions.

Table 1: Discourses of Collaboration Between Education and Work

<i>Discourses</i>	<i>Current positions</i>	<i>Desired future positions</i>
Organising work-based learning	VET actor positions: <i>Responsible education organiser; Inadequate promoter of student learning</i> Workplace actor positions: <i>Active supporter of student learning; Invisible actor in education</i>	VET actor positions: <i>Competent coach for working life; Mutual collaborator</i> Workplace actor positions: <i>A multi-faceted enabler of student learning</i>
Ensuring a skilled workforce	VET actor positions: <i>Responsibility shifter to workplaces; Uneven guarantor of skilled workforce</i> Workplace actor positions: <i>Further developer of competence in workplaces; Advocate for basic competences</i>	VET actor positions: <i>Rigorous gatekeeper of competence level</i> Workplace actor positions: <i>Further developer of competence in workplaces</i>
Supporting the development of workplaces	VET actor positions: <i>Trainer of staff competences</i> Workplace actor positions: <i>Consumer of training services; Self-organised developer of human resources</i>	VET actor positions: <i>Company consultant and innovator</i> Workplace actor positions: <i>Active co-developer of staff competences</i>
Promoting the vitality of vocational sectors	VET actor positions: <i>Recruiter and trainer serving the needs of companies; Modest contributor to student employment</i> Workplace actor positions: <i>Active recruiter and employer of students for company needs</i> Shared positions: <i>Small-scale player in the attractiveness of the sector</i>	Shared positions: <i>Promoter of the attractiveness of vocational sectors and education; Advocate for vocational education</i> VET actor positions: <i>Facilitator and coordinator of collaboration</i>

3.1 Organising Work-Based Learning

The discourse on the organisation of work-based learning was the most common, appearing in 23 interviews. It was used to describe the current implementation in a favourable and critical way. Work-based learning was seen as an important part of VET and worth developing from the point of view of workplace representatives. Thus, the discourse was also used as a means to describe the future ways to make VET more work-based and usable.

3.1.1 Current Collaboration on the Organisation of Work-Based Learning

Workplace representatives talked about variations in how education was organised across VET institutions. On the other hand, VET actors were positioned as responsible and proactive in collaboration related to the organisation of work-based learning. Teachers maintained close contacts with companies and promoted students' work-based learning, for example,

by contacting companies to take students to learn in their workplaces. In relation to the students' actual workplace training periods, they informed the companies about the learning objectives, provided knowledge about the students' backgrounds and supported the students' learning together with the company staff. As mentioned in one interview: "Collaboration works. When students come to us, we have an open relationship with the teachers, they tell us what kind of students they have, that's a big thing from a practical point of view. And we get information about their qualifications" (Interview 2).

Workplace representatives were also critical of the current state of implementation of work-based learning. In this case, teachers were seen as not adequately supporting the development of students' working life skills in the VET institutions, including social skills and readiness to arrive at work on time or to work all day in the workplace. This was the case especially with younger students. Teachers were also reported to have unrealistic expectations of students and workplaces, for example about how quickly a student can achieve the objectives set for a workplace training period, or what skills can be learned in the workplace. It was also noted that teachers did not provide adequate guidance to students and workplaces before and during these periods:

The student comes into the workplace with a training agreement in hand and doesn't know what part of the qualification they will be doing. This happens quite often and teachers do not get to know that workplace environment. For example, there are students who come in who are not able to do the part of the qualification that we want them to do. Unfortunately, some teachers are a little bit in the old world, so students are just pushed into the workplace. (Interview 20)

At best, companies portrayed themselves as actively providing training and learning opportunities for students (through training and apprenticeship agreements), visiting VET institutions, and hosting visits to their own facilities. On the other hand, many companies positioned themselves as invisible in collaboration. In particular, small companies struggled with a lack of resources, which made active collaboration and hosting students for work-based training periods difficult or even impossible.

3.1.2 Future Collaboration on Organisation of Work-Based Vocational Education

Workplace representatives expected teachers to take on a more responsible role as working life coaches. They felt that teachers should give students a realistic picture of working life and job requirements (e.g., the demands of shift work, the routine nature of work tasks) to better match students' expectations with the realities of the workplace. In addition, VET institutions were expected to engage in more active and reciprocal cooperation, for example, by proactively offering training and apprenticeship opportunities to companies. Teachers were

also encouraged to spend more time in workplaces to stay up to date with developments in vocational sectors and to better understand companies' needs in the development of education: "It would be tremendously great if educational institutions proactively inquired about the needs of companies when planning training programmes because that way, the offering and content of education could actually be adjusted to better fit the current times" (Interview 16).

In the future, companies would also like to see clearer and more comprehensive communication from teachers about education (e.g., apprenticeships) and guidance on how to support students in the workplace. Some workplace representatives wanted more feedback from teachers - for example, on how students experience their workplace training periods and what could be improved. There was also a need for workplaces to be more active future collaborators - for example, more lectures and learning opportunities in the workplace to support students' professional development. Just as teachers have a responsibility to provide a realistic picture of working life and work tasks, companies were seen as having a more active role in this, which could also help to reduce the number of students dropping out.

3.2 Ensuring a Skilled Workforce

The discourse of a skilled workforce took place in 15 interviews. The workplace representatives discussed the competences of students and their level before entering the work-based training periods, and the competences of graduates. These aspects were discussed rather critically in the present, while the discussion about the future was more development-oriented.

3.2.1 Current Collaboration in Ensuring a Skilled Workforce

Workplace representatives were rather critical of VET institutions as they felt that too much responsibility for developing students' professional skills was transferred to the workplaces. This was seen as problematic and unfair, as the basic skills of the students were not sufficiently developed in the institutions, leaving the workplace to teach the basics rather than deepen them during the workplace training periods. They also discussed the professional skill levels of graduates, which they noted varied widely. While vocational education tended to produce both raw talent and excellence, the trend in students' competence levels was seen as broadly downward compared to the past. VET institutions were described as uneven providers of skilled workers and resource sinks, as they were perceived as unable to provide sufficient skills for the future workforce. Additionally, it was felt that not all teachers had sufficient skills in the field, nor the agility to respond to the changing skills needs of the sector: "In vocational education, teachers are not qualified for their jobs. Not competent and not motivated" (Interview 11).

Workplace representatives emphasised the teacher as a guarantor of basic and comprehensive competences in a particular field and did not expect in-depth or fully tailored skills for specific business needs in the present and future. What is important for companies is that education provides a sufficiently skilled workforce whose skills can be deepened and tailored by the companies themselves through induction, guidance, training and learning at work - they were also committed to a position as further developers of skills. However, the trend towards requiring workplaces to develop the basic skills of graduates was not appreciated.

3.2.2 Future Collaboration in Ensuring Skilled Workforce

In particular, the future requirement for institutions was to ensure a good level of basic professional skills for students, both before and after the workplace training periods. Low levels of basic skills are a barrier to employment for students and do not match the needs of companies:

The development of professional competence should take place in the vocational institution and then, when enough of it has already happened, then to the work placement here in the companies. Society should stop pushing employers to train students, so that teachers told them a little bit of theory and then the companies train them as professionals. In the long run, this will not work, companies do not have the time or energy for it. (Interview 14)

Teachers' awareness of the latest developments in the vocational sector was seen as a prerequisite for ensuring students' basic skills. However, it was not only teachers and institutions that were criticised for the partly inadequate level of students' professional skills, but it was also hoped that VET actors would have sufficient resources in the future.

Workplace representatives underlined the responsibility of VET institutions to ensure the quality of education and the skills of students. This was expected to be strengthened in the future, as the current self-monitoring was considered insufficient due to the varying levels of competence of graduates. Thus, institutions should act as stricter gatekeepers of competence level, for example, by ensuring the real validity of assessments and avoiding overly positive grades. In addition to internal quality assurance, consideration was given to strengthening external control to ensure a skilled workforce. One option suggested was that funding for institutions should not be based on immediate graduation, but rather on delayed payment for graduates to ensure competence levels.

3.3 Supporting the Development of Workplaces

The discourse of workplace development emerged in 12 interviews, each of which highlighted the cooperation between VET institutions and workplaces as a means of company

development in different ways. The discourse on current collaboration was mainly appreciative, emphasising its crucial role in the continuous strengthening of employees' skills. Future collaboration was characterised as innovative, with the expectation that vocational institutions will play a more active role in innovating workplace operations, processes and services.

3.3.1 Current Collaboration in the Development of Staff Competences

Workplaces considered collaboration with VET institutions to be important in developing staff skills. This collaboration enabled staff to participate in courses and apprenticeships organised by the institutions. Teachers were positioned as talented, enthusiastic and reliable in tailoring and delivering training services to the needs of companies. Collaboration with key partner institutions was perceived to be smooth, but the quality of collaboration was perceived to vary between VET institutions. In collaboration, workplace representatives expected the VET institutions to understand and respond to their training needs and to take a proactive approach in proposing new training opportunities in line with the latest developments in the field. Collaboration was perceived as particularly smooth when it was based on a genuine and long-term relationship, trust and strong business knowledge on the part of the teachers:

We have institutions with which we have excellent collaboration. These relationships are built up little by little, and confidentiality is really important in these matters. I can't be on the map of developments in the field all the time, but from the key partners there are suggestions of this kind on how we can possibly further train staff.... The most important starting point is an understanding of the business, and that's how we start to build the training courses tailored to the company's needs. And then such an open discussion and confidentiality with the institution is really important.
(Interview 6)

In the development of employees' competences, workplaces position themselves as consumers of training services, actively participating in their planning with institutions. On the other hand, some companies pointed out that they acted rather independently in updating the skills of their employees. This was due, for example, to the well-established internal development processes of large companies or the emphasis on learning competences while working.

3.3.2 Future Collaboration in the Development of Workplace Operations and Services

Workplace representatives expressed the wish for closer and more intensive future working with VET institutions to develop staff skills, for example, by increasing the number of

apprenticeships. The active role of workplaces in strengthening collaboration was particularly emphasised. Simultaneously, it was hoped that future training provided by educational institutions would be more practical and less theoretical, and that teachers would play a greater role in facilitating the exchange of experience and good practices between companies. This was seen as an approach that supports the development of staff skills and the introduction of new practices in companies. There was also a need for a new kind of collaboration focused on workplace development. Companies further hoped that teachers would play a more active role as facilitators of innovation, consultants and problem-solvers in the development of company procedures, practices and services:

I think there is definitely potential for institutions to be partners in future product development. The innovation that comes from them is important, because they can look at it in a certain way from the outside. There could certainly be new opportunities to develop the activities of companies that we ourselves cannot find within our own organisation. When the forms and the structure are suitable, it is certainly a potential alternative. (Interview 22)

One of the wishes expressed in the consultation and development activities of the VET institutions was that companies should have a designated contact person in the VET institution who could be contacted at a low threshold in problem situations where solutions are needed. In the future, teachers were also expected to play an important role in disseminating development trends and research results in the vocational sector to companies.

3.4 Promoting the Vitality of Vocational Sectors

The discourse of promoting the prosperity of the vocational sectors was less emergent, appearing in 11 interviews. It addressed the concerns of workplace representatives regarding the current employability and recruitment of students into the field, and an emerging awareness of future shared activities to promote the attractiveness of the vocational sectors and education. There was more of a business focus in the present than the future talk, which was more focused on promoting the flourishing of vocational sectors.

3.4.1 Current Collaboration in Promoting the Vitality of Vocational Sectors

For companies, collaboration with vocational education was a pivotal way to recruit and employ graduating professionals. Therefore, they aimed to be actively present in VET institutions, for example, through company visits, lectures and presentations, promoting themselves as a workplace for work-based learning and apprenticeships, and as a future employer. The largest companies also organised recruitment-based training programmes for jobseekers in collaboration

with VET institutions, combining workforce acquisition with training tailored to the company's needs. In this collaboration, VET actors were positioned as competent and reliable partners:

We are facing significant challenges in finding employees. That's why we have our own recruitment-based training programme. It is carried out in collaboration with a vocational institution, through which suitable employees are trained for us. This way, the company's imprint is immediately attached to the person. (Interview 22)

In addition, companies actively informed VET institutions about open positions, but challenges included incomplete contact information on their websites and a lack of response to inquiries. In this regard, companies did not perceive VET institutions as the most effective supporters of student employment, nor was vocational education seen as comprehensively producing a workforce for current needs and positions experiencing labour shortages due to the ineffective allocation of study placements. From the companies' perspective, this did not contribute to the vitality of industry or the employment of students.

Workplace representatives described companies and vocational institutions as relatively separate and small-scale actors in promoting the attractiveness of vocational education and sectors. However, they had individually introduced the field in primary schools and participated in projects aimed at increasing the visibility of vocational education and the industry, as well as improving career opportunities for young people and a wider audience (e.g., videos and online materials).

3.4.2 Future Collaboration in Promoting the Vitality of Vocational Sectors

The availability of workforce is already a challenge in many industries, and the situation will not improve as large age groups retire. Therefore, workplace representatives emphasised the need for closer collaboration with VET institutions. Strengthening the attractiveness and vitality of the industry requires active collaboration from both parties, such as informing primary school students, increasing career counsellors' awareness of job opportunities in the field, and changing the outdated public perceptions of the industry to attract genuinely interested and committed workers:

Companies can partly enhance the attractiveness of the field and improve the positive employee experience. However, I believe there is an opportunity to combine the strengths of VET institutions and the business world to further increase this attractiveness. This is especially important for those finishing basic education who don't yet have a clear vision of what they want to do in the future. That is the perfect moment to collaborate in creating a better understanding of different fields and introducing young people to various career opportunities. (Interview 9)

Joint efforts were also seen as important because public discourse emphasises increasing the number of higher education graduates to raise the overall education level. This does not

sufficiently guide young people towards vocational education, even though the labour market specifically needs VET graduates.

Although many companies were motivated by the importance of collaboration for the visibility of vocational sectors, they hoped that VET institutions would take on the primary responsibility of organising activities due to their limited resources. One suggested option was to have an external coordinator ensure continuous and systematic collaboration between education providers and workplaces to support student employment and the vitality of the industry. VET actors were also expected to continue playing an active role in implementing recruitment-based training programmes and investing in promoting student employment, for example, by clarifying their communication about the types of professionals they train and whom companies can contact when they have recruitment needs.

4 Discussion and Conclusions

In this section, we first review the key findings of the study, followed by an evaluation of its strengths and limitations. We then reflect on the implications of these findings for future research and outline potential avenues for further research. Finally, we summarise practical implications and present the main conclusions.

4.1 Discussion of the Main Findings

The focus of this study was on how workplace representatives talk about collaboration between education and work. Four different discourses were identified relating to organising work-based learning, ensuring a skilled workforce, supporting the development of companies, and promoting the vitality of vocational sectors. The talk related to work-based learning and a skilled workforce was rather critical of VET institutions and teachers' practices. In the future, teachers were expected to take on a more responsible role in relation to work-based learning and communication, while students were expected to possess a sufficient competence that could be further deepened into company-specific expertise. The talk related to supporting the development of companies was appreciative and forward-looking, with references to educational services and partnerships. In the future, companies hoped that teachers would take a more active role, for example, as promoters of innovation, consultants, and problem-solvers in the development of business operations, practices, and services. The talk related to the vitality of vocational sectors was still emerging, but joint efforts and a shared commitment to this goal were seen as important. However, at present, companies and VET actors were advancing this matter separately and on a small scale.

In this study, workplace representatives perceived collaboration and its necessity in a highly multi-faceted manner. Their perspectives considered individual and educational

aspects focusing on work-based learning, which is also highly visible in previous research (see, e.g., Schaap et al., 2012; Wesselink et al., 2010). However, workplace representatives also advocated for collaboration related to organisational development and the services provided by VET institutions, which is visible in recent research highlighting VET providers as service providers or as workplaces' strategic partners (see Cai & Kosaka, 2024; Lavía et al., 2024; Olazaran et al., 2018). Additionally, in this study, the workplace representatives placed special emphasis on the importance of joint sectoral development (see also Buchanan et al., 2017). These findings are also highly relevant in the broader international discussion from a theoretical perspective, as workplace representatives' views are linked to learning-focused approaches, services, and wider development. Many theoretical frameworks that are used to study collaboration between education and work view it from a specific approach or on a single analytical level, whether individual, institutional, or sectoral/regional. While specific frameworks and perspectives are necessary, this study suggests that it is equally important to acknowledge that these distinct approaches and analytical levels may manifest simultaneously in collaboration and in the expectations attached to it. Thus, there is a need to examine collaboration in VET through a multi-level and multi-faceted approach.

4.2 Evaluation of the Study and Future Avenues for Research

A strength of this study is that the interviews made it possible to describe the different and several positions offered to VET and workplace actors in a temporal continuum. When the workplace representatives positioned the VET actors and themselves in their talk, they also drew on their past and current experiences and compared the current situation with them. A central limitation of the study is the rather limited number of interviews, which cannot be considered representative, for example, from the point of view of different vocational fields. However, companies from many vocational sectors were represented in the interviews, so the findings can be considered to have some degree of transferability.

The quality and reliability of our research can be considered in light of qualitative research and discourse analysis principles (Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014; Nikander, 2012; O'Reilly et al., 2020; Ullrich, 2022). In discourse analysis, reliability is understood notably through transparency and reflexivity in the research process (Nikander, 2012). Accordingly, we have clarified how our ontological and epistemological assumptions guided the analysis, how the data were co-constructed in interviews, and how our interpretations are grounded in the material (Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014; O'Reilly et al., 2020). We have sought to be reflexive regarding our own backgrounds and assumptions, which undoubtedly shaped the course of the interviews, but also supported our ability to recognise and interpret nuances in the data (Ullrich, 2022). The reliability of our interpretations was further enhanced by cross-reading the data, which ensured the credibility of the findings and helped mitigate the influence of researchers'

preconceptions. All researchers familiarised themselves with the data and discussed the general principles of analysis. Each researcher conducted a preliminary categorisation of interview extracts. On this basis, one author carried out the detailed analysis while consulting the other researchers, for instance, in naming the discourses with specific positions (O'Reilly et al., 2020). We also sought to increase the validity of our research by making explicit how the analytical findings were derived from the data, providing detailed evidence in the form of interview extracts together with explanations of the conclusions drawn (O'Reilly et al., 2020).

In the future, there is a need for more research on collaboration between education and work, from the perspectives of workplace representatives, teachers, and students. Future studies could examine how collaboration between VET and working life can support flexible competence development and adaptation to changes in the labour market, while also considering sectoral and regional perspectives. In this context, it would also be relevant to examine the link between education and work not only from learning-centred perspectives but also by considering how collaboration fosters innovation activities and capabilities (see also Olazaran et al., 2018). Furthermore, we lack an in-depth understanding of teachers' social networks with working-life partners, including collaboration patterns, roles, and dynamics. Analysing these networks could enhance teachers' professional development, strengthen institutional collaboration with workplaces, and ultimately improve students' employability. Moreover, in Finnish VET, students vary widely in age, with the majority being adults. This aspect appeared only modestly in the findings of this study. Future research should address this issue from the perspective of teachers' work; for example, how teachers perceive and accommodate the individual goals and prior competences of students of different ages. In future studies, it is also important to hear the students' voices and provide research evidence from the students' perspective on how collaboration between teachers and trainers can support students' individual learning pathways, well-being, and future plans.

4.3 Practical Implications and Conclusions

Although our study was conducted in the Finnish context, it highlights observations of broader international relevance in VET, particularly regarding vocational teachers' competences and identities, responsibilities related to collaboration, and the resources and structures that support such collaboration.

Vocational teachers are the ones that are expected to build closer relationships between education and work in practice. This study as well as previous research (e.g., Lehtonen et al., 2018; Vähäsantanen et al., 2009) suggest that teachers' competences and identities are at the heart of a multi-faceted collaboration between vocational education and work. The traditional roles and competences of the teacher, for example, related to guiding students together with workplace trainers and organising work-based learning, are essential. Our

findings emphasise that VET institutions have taken on the task of staff development and that teachers are perceived as competent in this area. However, an emerging form of collaboration in the study was research, development and innovation activities and teachers were hoped to be future innovators, who develop workplaces in an agentic and competent way. Previous research similarly suggests that vocational teachers' competences should include not only pedagogical competence but also competences in partnership and innovation (see Tapani & Salonen, 2019). This underscores the importance of enhancing teachers' motivation and competences to engage in collaboration outside the school environment (Kolho et al., 2023; Sommarström et al., 2020). Teacher education and teachers' work conditions need to support the development of teachers' comprehensive competences and lay the foundations for a broad identity orientation (see, e.g., Antera & Teräs, 2024), which goes beyond a more traditional, narrower identity position, encompassing mainly aspects of teaching and being a professional in a vocational field.

Although in Finland the primary responsibility for collaboration can be seen as resting with VET institutions, both schools and workplaces are needed, for example, to ensure students' fundamental competences, support their work-based learning pathways, and facilitate their smooth transitions into the labour market (see also Lehtonen et al., 2018). Formal agreements may support collaboration (Hiim, 2023) but it is also necessary to recognise the need for communication and the definition of mutual needs and interests (Lavía et al., 2024). This study further highlights the organisation, management and resourcing of teachers' work to enable them to work with companies in a way that is sustainable and meaningful for them, students and companies. Although personal networks may be important for fostering collaboration between education and work (Schwede et al., 2025), collaboration should not only be based on individual teachers and their networks, but VET institutions should have strategies and culture that should support systematic multi-faceted, mutual and long-term partnerships.

Teachers require enough resources and structures to create collaborative networks, since building trusting and reciprocal relationships takes time and sustained effort, as the findings show. While teachers must also have a certain agency and autonomy to enable natural, creative, smooth and personal collaboration with companies (e.g., Kolho et al., 2023), one perspective on organising collaboration between vocational education and workplaces is team-based and hence more of a team effort of teachers together with workplace supervisors (Mazereeuw et al., 2016) or in interdisciplinary teacher teams (Truijen et al., 2013). In this way, collaborative relationships with workplaces would not depend on individual teachers. This kind of way of collaborating could increase their engagement and well-being at work - not everyone needs to know everything, and things could be done together. Namely, the meaningfulness and attractiveness of the profession is threatened if the work of teachers is often considered too fragmented (Tapani & Salonen, 2019).

From the perspective of international VET research, discourses of collaboration can also be utilised in international comparative studies.

However, it should also be borne in mind that the study portrays the views of workplace representatives, possibly shaped by a specific purpose. It could also explain rather critical perspectives in certain ways of talking, such as in relation to the organisation of work-based learning. The findings emphasise the idea of serving companies when workplace representatives describe the (future) collaboration between VET and workplaces. In the future, it will be important to discuss more about the roles and tasks of VET. It is not our intention to promote the idea that VET should act as a one-way servant of companies. VET also carries broader responsibilities, such as fostering students' citizenship and promoting their well-being, which should not be overlooked in the future. Consequently, there is a need to rethink talk that often emphasises provider-client perspectives rather than partnerships, and to advance a critical debate on the role of VET, the diverse goals of collaboration between education and work, and the ways in which these approaches can be combined in a sustainable manner.

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Ethics Statement

The study adheres to both international and national fundamental ethical principles. In accordance with national guidelines, the research design does not require an ethical review statement from an ethics committee. The study follows ethical and legal requirements as well as the implementing organization's guidelines concerning informing participants about the purpose and content of the research, ensuring their voluntary participation and obtaining their informed consent, and processing their data.

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