

Practice in tertiary vocational education

The purpose of this report is to inform the vocational school sector about the main trends for integrated practice placements in tertiary vocational education. The study, which is based on a questionnaire survey as well as more in-depth interviews, finds great diversity in the organization of practice placements, which is adapted to the course content, the students' prior work experience and the opportunity for leave from their paid job.

Summary

NOKUT has so far known little about the organisation and quality of practice in vocational schools. In the context of tertiary vocational education, practice is defined as a method of learning where the student has the opportunity to practice in a workplace outside of the school, in a work-like situation. The goal could be to exercise new practical skills, or to implement new theory in tasks that the student already has practical experience with. NOKUT's Department of Analysis and Development has developed a two-part report about the use of practice in tertiary vocational education in order to find out which forms of practice placements are used and how effective they are, and to uncover any challenges to quality in vocational courses with practice placements. The main focus has been on education in healthcare, partly because practice placements constitute a large proportion of these courses compared to education in other subject areas, and partly because there is a public focus on vocational schools as competence builders in the healthcare sector.

The first part of the report is a quantitative survey of all providers of tertiary vocational education. The second part is a qualitative interview study of a sample of educational programmes in health care, where the purpose was to understand why practice is organized in different ways and how the practice placements are intended to achieve the learning objectives. Chapter 1 in the report presents the background for the study and relevant questions for investigations, chapter 2 reports the main findings from the questionnaire survey and chapter 3 discusses the findings from the qualitative interviews.

Main findings presented in the report:

- At least 15 percent of all tertiary vocational education programmes have practice placements with supervision and guidance at a workplace outside the school. The most common among these is that the practice constitutes between 20 and 30 percent of the programme. Healthcare is the subject area which has the most practice in tertiary vocational education.
- The student group that take up tertiary vocational education in health is very diverse. Some schools aim for further education of students with long work experience in healthcare, whereas others primarily recruit students without such experience.
- The organization of practice is often a compromise between the social and individual needs for competence. Some of the health care educational providers take responsibility for boosting competence in the sector, but have to adapt to the students' frequent inability to take a leave of absence from their job.
- There is great diversity in how practice is organized time-wise in relation to theory, and to what extent the vocational school has formal agreements with the workplaces.
- Almost 80 percent of the tertiary vocational education programmes with practice placements, allow their students to conduct some of all of the required practice at their own workplace, but only 40 percent have more than ten percent of their students in placement at their own workplace.
- Good assignments and means of evaluation in the practice period could be just as important as supervision to integrate theoretical and practical knowledge.

The report discusses the advantages and disadvantages of different forms of organization and adaptation to the needs of the student and society in general. The findings give no cause for concern over the general quality of education in the practice placements of tertiary vocational education. Rather, we find that in general, the different practice arrangements are well suited to both the students' and society's need for competence in different niches of the education market.

The main recommendation for the vocational schools is that they to a greater extent should specify the objectives and target groups of the education, inform the students early about the arrangements for practice placements and aim for adaptive and thorough means of evaluation.